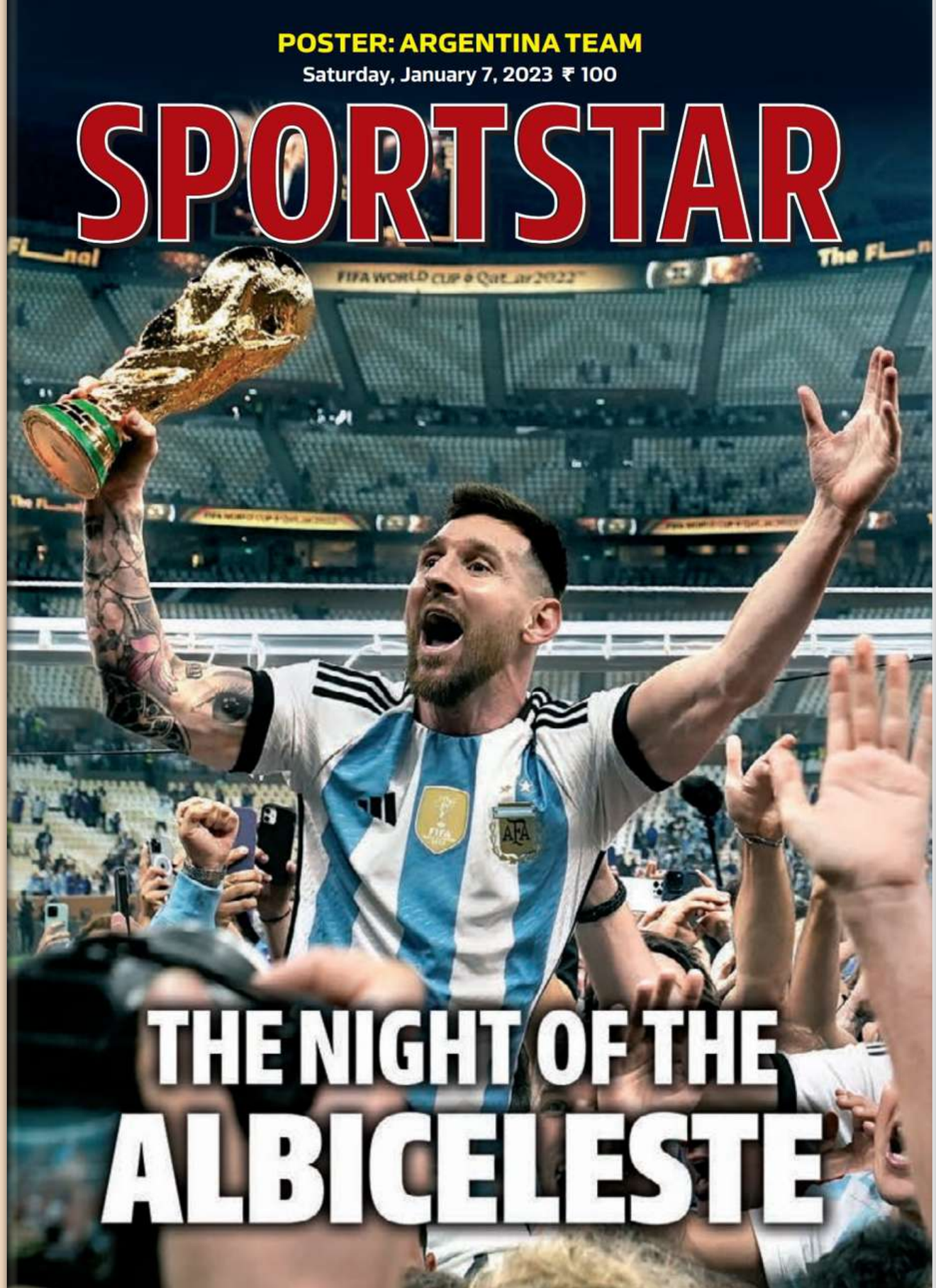
POSTER: ARGENTINA TEAM

Saturday, January 7, 2023 ₹ 100

SPORTSTAR



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SPORTSTAR

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SCAN ME

I have to be prepared for that, the pressure. The people, the players as well, are going to have all their eyes on me and I'm going to have to be prepared for that."

– World No. 1 tennis player Carlos Alcaraz, aware that 2023 will come with new experiences for him, now that he is a Grand Slam winner and is at the summit of the rankings.

The last 10 months have been a battle at every turn. I dug deep to keep my faith and it was the love from so many of you that helped keep me going."

– WNBA star Brittney Griner is relieved and grateful for coming back home (in the U.S.) after 10 months under detention in Russia. She was released from a Russian penal colony as part of a prisoner swap between U.S. and Russia.

Kenyan Olympic champion David Rudisha survives plane crash

AFP

David Rudisha had a harrowing experience in an aircraft in southern Kenya, and said he was grateful to be alive.

Rudisha had just taken off from a Kenyan reserve hosting the "Maasai Olympics" — a series of sporting competitions involving Maasai youth — when his aircraft encountered trouble and was forced to make an emergency landing. "It was a scary episode where you hold your heart in your hand as you pray to God. The pilot did an incredible job to keep the plane afloat and stable for long. We thank God we all came out alive," Rudisha told *The Nation* newspaper.

The 800m runner won Olympic golds in 2012 and 2016, and world titles in 2011 and 2015.

Turkish athlete Aras Kaya tests positive for EPO, banned

Olympic runner Aras Kaya tested positive for EPO at a 10km race in Romania in September.

The violation carries a four-year ban but Kaya received a one-year reduction because he "returned a signed admission" on the day he was notified of the test result, the Athletes Integrity Unit said.

His suspension commenced on December 4.

GETTY IMAGES

No quick return for Russia – Sebastian Coe

AP

Russian athletes will continue to be disallowed from participating in events under the ambit of World Athletics in the "foreseeable future" because of Russia's war with Ukraine, World Athletics president Sebastian Coe has said.

"All athletes, personnel, and the whole entourage are excluded from the World Athletics series of events for the foreseeable future because of the Ukraine situation. The IOC made very clear that the sanctions remain but for us, it's a slightly more complicated and nuanced landscape because, of course, we have the two streams of work running alongside each other. The IOC pretty much made it clear that it is for the [sports] federations to evaluate the situation for their own sports and we will continue to protect the integrity of our sport," Coe said.

Rafael Nadal splits with coach Francis Roig

GETTY IMAGES

Francis Roig, who has coached Rafael Nadal for the last 18 years, will leave his role to start a new project with more than one player. "Francis is a great coach who knows tennis well and has helped me a lot to get better and better. I only have words of gratitude and I wish him all the luck in the world in his new project," Nadal said. Roig worked alongside Toni Nadal — Nadal's uncle — and more recently with Carlos Moya and Marc Lopez.

"It's been a pleasure and honour to work with Rafa and the rest of the team," Roig said in a statement. "We never thought we could get so many results and have such a long career with him but Rafa's a phenomenon and makes everything look easy."

GETTY IMAGES

HIS CUP RUNNETH OVER

Lionel Messi has been the superstar of this tournament, dragging and daring a team of good but not exceptional individuals to be better than the sum of its parts. The spirit of the collective has been Argentina's biggest strength on its way to become the world champion after 36 years.

AYON SENGUPTA

A sea of bobbing heads dressed in Albiceleste — the blue-and-white colour of the night — had taken over the Lusail Boulevard. This was not just the celebrations of the National Day of Qatar but the outpouring of emotions for the Three Stars that had finally come Argentina's way. The fireworks and the steaming jets were neither the attraction nor the distraction here as the eyes were only following the bus that had the champions who had made this possible.

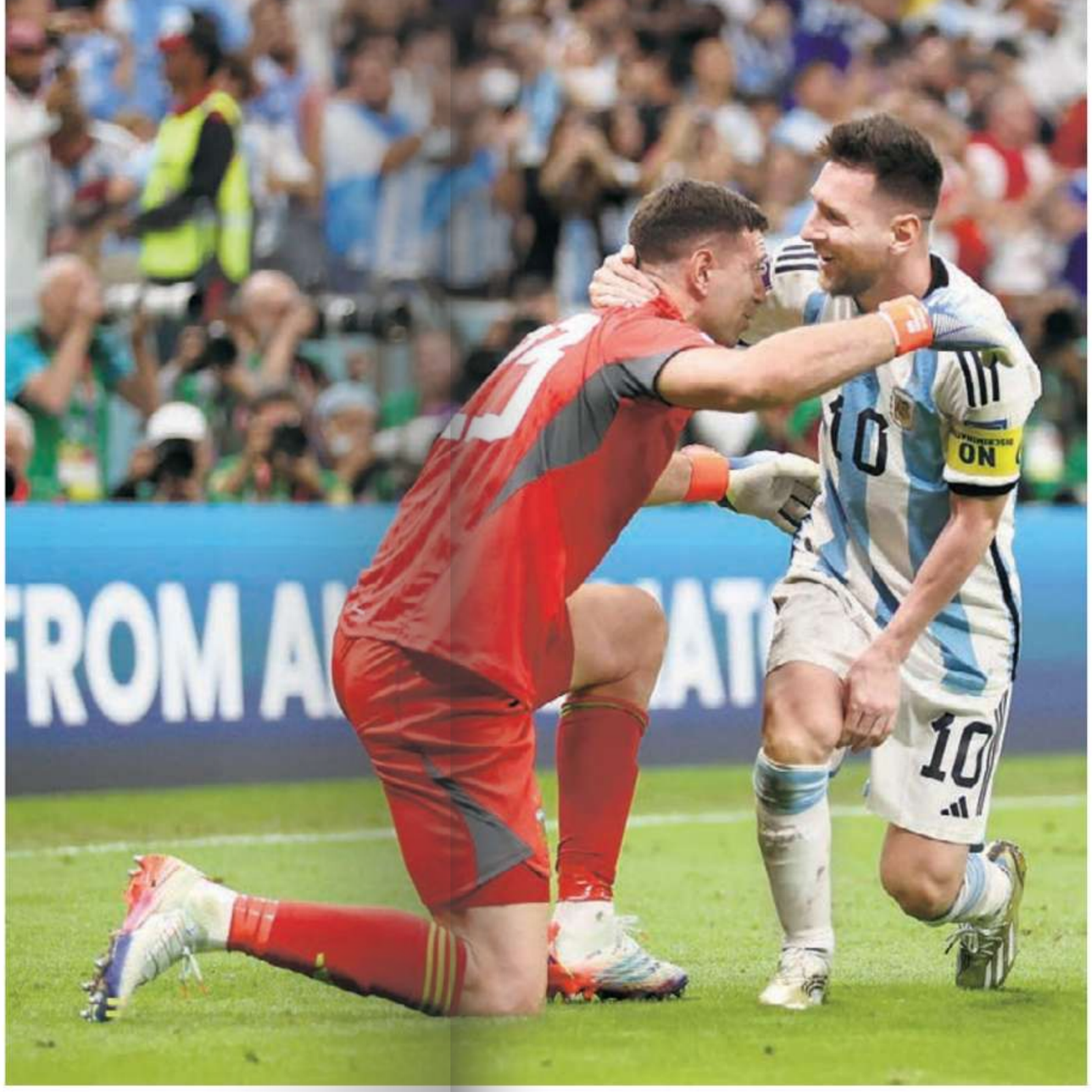
But Lionel Messi, the hero of the night, was not easy to find as he was surrounded by his mates, wearing the Argentina flag like a superhero's cape. His constant grappling with the burdens of past were finally a thing of the past, and his smile was melting everyone's heart.

Forever he had been compared with the immortal standards of Diego and forever it seemed he was destined to fail, the cross too heavy for him and his comrades. Finals came and finals went, but a trophy in national colours could never be his as the Gods had decided to be cruel. But after four summits unscaled, the tide seemed to have turned with the 2021 Copa America triumph.

His unbeaten Argentina (36 games) had arrived in Doha as a favourite and there was a buzz of anticipation in every corner of the city since the World Cup started with the fanfare of BTS and Morgan Freeman on the 20th day of November. Every streetside conversation over *kadak (chai)*, pleasantries swapped with stadium security officers, or casual conversations with shopkeepers from the coconut tree-, toddy shop-dotted India's western coastal state had been about "Meesi", his legacy and the battle with the imagery and joy that Maradona left for posterity.

But, that Messi would fulfill his destiny, rising from the Arabian desert to finally attain absolution, was always (in their mind) the end result of this expensively assembled World Cup, alongside a belief that their land — adopted or own — would become the permanent shrine for (one of) football's greatest of all time.

An opening game loss to (the host's) neighbour Saudi Arabia did not waver that belief, and their support and conviction remained steadfast. And when the moment arrived, the locals — an eclectic mix of thobe-clad Arabs and South Asians and Africans in their designer knockoffs — were all proud. Each etching in their memory the moment when the king, so long without a kingdom, was finally crowned. The furtive call home by the Bangladeshi restroom attender at the final whistle, eulogising the virtues of Messi and whispering *"jibon sharthak hoyiya geche"* (life is fulfilled), or the blurry video call by the Indian foodstall worker to his father to catch the moment when Messi lifted the Cup, or the tears of an Arab child wearing an Argentine *gutra* (head scarf), tell us how this World Cup has made Messi one of their own, the one true global icon of this age where heroes are difficult to find.



Rock solid: Lionel Messi with goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez. The Argentine custodian came up with brilliant saves during the penalty shoot-outs against the Netherlands in the quarterfinals, and against France in the summit clash.
GETTY IMAGES

He has been the superstar of this tournament, dragging and daring a team of good but not exceptional individuals to be better than the sum of its parts. The spirit of the collective has been Argentina's biggest strength on its way to become the world champion after 36 years. "We are fighters, and we were very strong despite the goals France scored. It was similar to the match against the Netherlands as we wanted to win and kept fighting," coach Lionel Scaloni said after winning the biggest game of his life.

This win was also for the Argentine people who are facing one of the longest extended economic turmoils in their nation's history. "These players play for the Argentine people; this is the greatest pride to play for Argentina and they broke their backs as they understood what they had to do on the pitch. Today we are World Cup champions," said the other Lionel, who, like his more famous namesake, is living a dream, taking the coveted trophy back to their country.

Here, in the final, Messi and his Argentina refused to submit even as a young Kylian Mbappe threatened to rewrite the preordained script by scoring a hat-trick and leaving his mark as the World Cup's top-scorer.

"The match was insane," said an emotional Scaloni. "I told the players in critical moments that we had to be optimistic. France had two chances and equalised before full time, and we knew that if we played our game, we would have our chances. And before the penalties, Emiliano [Martinez] is a positive guy and he told his team that he was going to make some saves. And we had so many takers and that shows the confidence in the team."

The goalkeeper had also been brave in the shootout against the Netherlands, and, in the final, his antics — he threw the ball away, forcing Aurelien Tchouameni to fetch it ahead of the third penalty — ensured France could only score two as Argentina converted its first four.

That fighting spirit surged through the veins of every Argentine player and Messi, as well, was no longer in his zen bubble but a brawler for the cause of his team. He was ready to snarl and bite and hook the odd elbow as all was fair in this fight. Every human emotion could be seen through him — the euphoria of a win, the joy of a goal, the despondency of conceding, the forlornness when things didn't go right, and the anger when he perceived he and his team had been wronged.

He was the leader, who had asked his men to blindly put their faith in him and he was hellbent on keeping the promises he had made. "It is such a pleasure to coach him and to be his teammate as he gives so much to his team. Everything he transmits to his teammates is something unparalleled that I have never seen before," coach

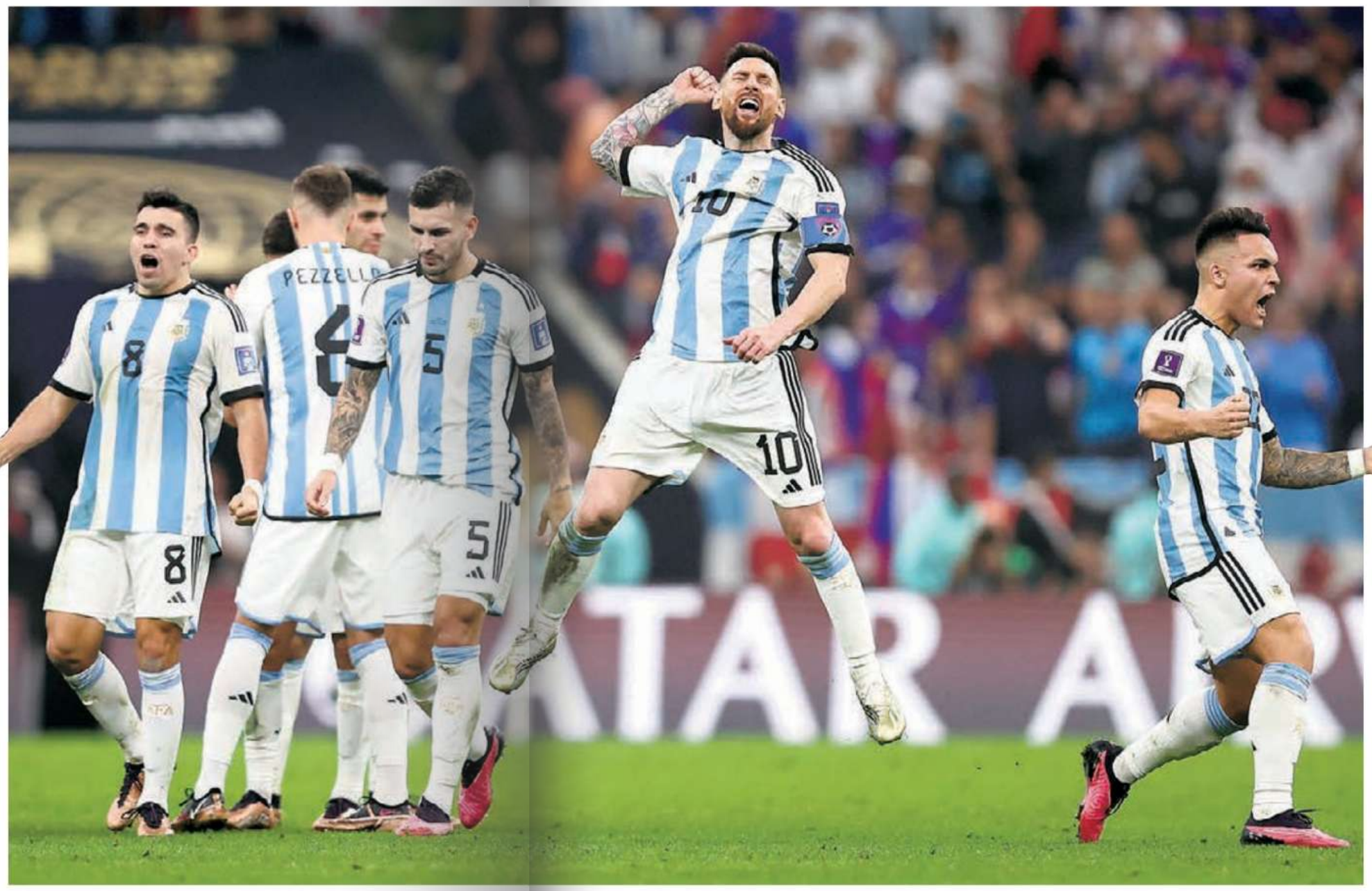
POSTER

Scaloni said about his captain.

The out-of-character reactions by Messi during and after the quarterfinals victory over a tough-spirited Louis Van Gaal's Netherlands and his animated interactions with referees have led to an agreement among most football critics that the World Cup saw the "Maradona-sation" of Messi, where winning at all costs often led to anarchy. But Messi is no Diego and perhaps never wanted to be. Unlike Diego, Messi works best in a system well-defined to accentuate his qualities. "If you see the development of our journey, you'll realise we played differently back in 2019, after, or even during, some games from the Copa America in 2019. So, we had to learn which ones were the players he [Messi] felt comfortable with on the pitch, because at the end of the day, he plays with the ball, and needs to feel comfortable. And it was equally important that the rest of the players felt comfortable with him, so we had a complete combination," Scaloni, after the final victory, emphasised the point of finding the right players and the right system for Messi.

Legendary Argentinian football journalist Marcela Mora y Araujo, who has watched both Messi and Maradona from close quarters wrote beautifully about how this World Cup was not about Messi becoming Maradona, but Messi becoming Messi. "My view is that Messi is very much not becoming Maradona; what we are seeing is Messi becoming himself. More and more comfortable in his own skin, more assertive in his own unique personality, more comfortable in his own style of leadership," she wrote in the *Guardian* ahead of the final. "I first met him [Messi] in 2009, a one-to-one interview for a *UNICEF* book about players and their childhoods. Messi was polite, reserved, and only livened up after a number of questions. Noticeably, when talking about what a sore loser he is — he hates losing at everything, card games, dice. Anything. Back then he told me that for a long time when he was a young boy he didn't realise how good he was at football, because he secretly suspected his older brothers and their mates purposely let him win — to avoid his tantrums if he lost."

In the present national setup most of his teammates grew up idolising him, whereas the support staff of Scaloni, his deputies Pablo Aimar (Messi's hero), Roberto Ayala, Walter Samuel were his early teammates, and Messi had at last found that harmony which was always missing when he played for Argentina.



United they rise: The fighting spirit surged through the veins of every Argentine player and Messi as well, who was no longer in his zen bubble. GETTY IMAGES

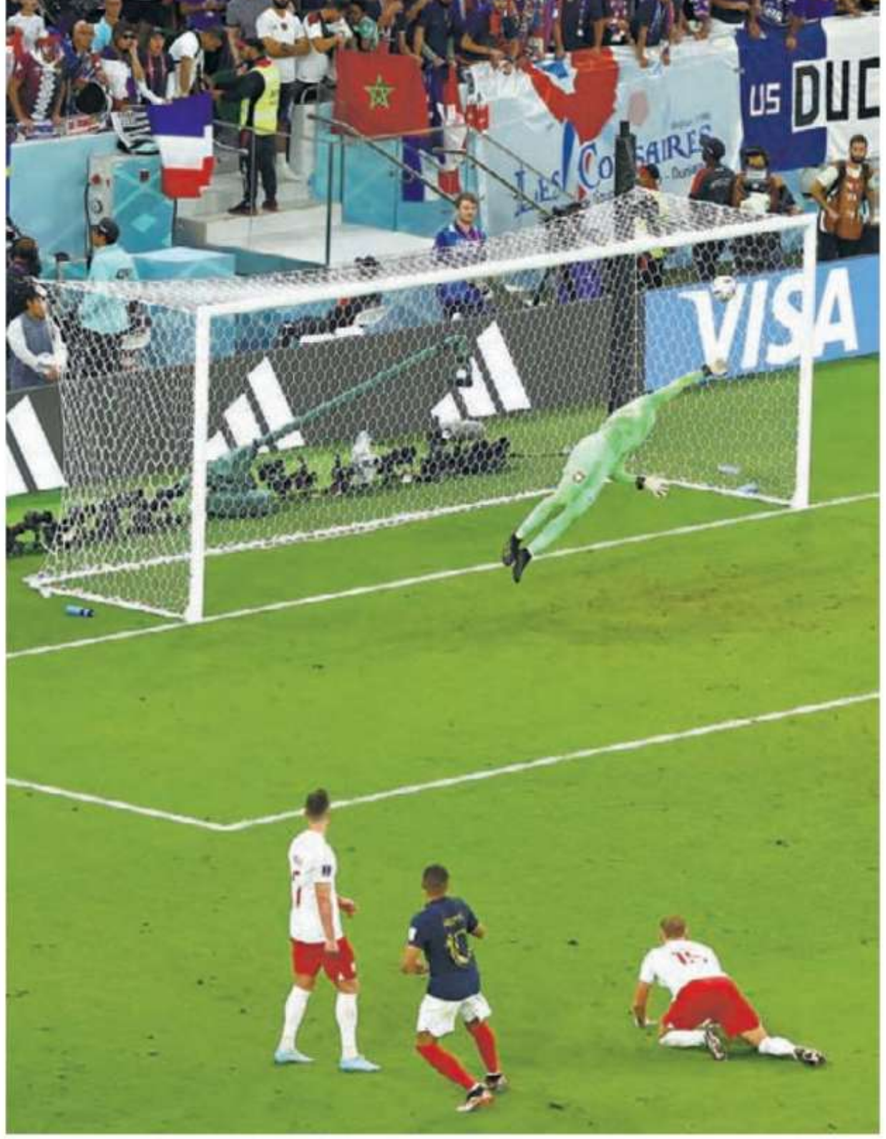
Messi had already indicated the World Cup final would be his last game in the global event, but with the burden of the one missing trophy lifted in the fifth attempt, he promised to entertain his fans for at least a few more games (in national colours). "Obviously, I wanted to complete my career with this — I can't ask for more," he said. "Finishing my career this way is impressive. After this, what else? I have a Copa America, a World Cup. I love football, what I do. I enjoy being part of the national team, the group. I want to enjoy a couple more matches as a world champion."

Scaloni, who had convinced a disillusioned Messi to commit again to the national cause after the 2018 World Cup disappointment, hopes his persuasion skills will prolong the stay of the now-happy legend. "We need to save him a spot for the [next] World Cup. If he wants to keep playing, he will be with us. He is entitled to decide what he wants to do with his career," he said.

But, for now, with the World Cup trophy tightly cradled against his chest, Messi, at last, had no more shadows to chase.

I'm in my zone: Memphis Depay gestures after putting Netherlands ahead in the 10th minute against USA in the round of 16 at the Khalifa Stadium. Netherlands was the stronger side, overpowering the Americans 3-1. AFP

Wizard at work: Lionel Messi shoots to score Argentina's first goal against Australia in a round-of-16 clash at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. It was his first goal for his team in the knockout phase of the FIFA World Cup. Argentina went on to win 2-1, with Messi clinching the player of the match award. AP



Action replay: Kylian Mbappe scored two similar goals as France crushed Poland at the Al Thumama Stadium. Both of his goals were off excellent kicks from within the box on the left. Here, the ball evades the leap of the goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny as Mbappe scores his second goal (and France's third) in the 91st minute. REUTERS

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PHOTOLINE
ROUND OF 16

Face off: Jordan Henderson (left) and Jude Bellingham celebrate after Henderson puts England ahead against Senegal in the 38th minute. England added two more, one of them by captain Harry Kane, as Senegal was comprehensively beaten. AP

Heartbreak: A Japanese fans can't hide his sadness after his country bows out of the FIFA World Cup with a loss in penalties to Croatia in the pre-quarterfinals. Japan has never been able to progress past this stage at the World Cup. AP

Time for the Samba: Brazil enthralled South Korea and all those who watched the round-of-16 contest at Stadium 974. Neymar converted a penalty while Vinicius Jr., Richarlison and Lucas Paqueta all scored a goal each. The final score: 4-1. AP

Catch us if you can! The Moroccan team is euphoric after its win in penalties over heavyweight Spain. Playing with heart and backed by the crowd, Morocco fought bravely and pipped the 2010 champion after Spain's players missed three of their chances during the penalty shootout. AFP

Rat-tat-tat: Portugal demolished Switzerland 6-1 at Lusail Stadium to storm into the quarterfinals. Here, Goncalo Ramos gestures after scoring one of his three goals, the first hat-trick of the Qatar World Cup. GETTY IMAGES

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PHOTOLINE ROUND OF 16

The victor and the vanquished: Croatia's Ivan Perisic consoles Marquinhos after the Brazilian missed his penalty and ended his team's involvement in the 2022 FIFA World Cup. After a goalless 90 minutes, Brazil took the lead through Neymar in extra-time, before Bruno Petkovic equalised in the 116th minute. Croatia won 4-2 on penalties. REUTERS

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PHOTOLINE
QUARTERFINALS

Hoodwinked: It was a clash of the heavyweights at the Lusail Stadium. Netherlands stood toe to toe with Argentina throughout the duel. Here, Netherlands equalises with a clever execution of a free kick: instead of hitting the ball into the body of the Argentine defenders or attempting a direct goal, Teun Koopmeiners makes a short pass — along the ground — to Wout Werghoust, who makes the finish even as Argentina's defenders stand stunned. It wasn't to be for Netherlands, though, as it lost 4-3 in the penalty shootout. GETTY IMAGES

Close shave: Bruno Fernandes' shot hits the crossbar in the 45th minute, preventing Portugal from equalising just three minutes after Youssef En-Nesyri put Morocco ahead, much to the delight of the crowd at the Al Thumama Stadium. Morocco retained the lead and dumped Portugal out of the World Cup, becoming the first African nation to make it to the semifinals. GETTY IMAGES

Shocker: England captain Harry Kane reacts after missing a penalty against France in the 84th minute of their quarterfinal contest. He struck the ball hard but couldn't keep it below the crossbar. Had he scored, England would have made it 2-2 to stay in the hunt. His miss meant England bowed out with a 2-1 loss after regulation time. AP

The magic of Messi: Lionel Messi tries to weave his way past Ivan Perisic during the semifinal between Argentina and Croatia. Messi again displayed his virtuoso talents; the third goal by Julian Alvarez was in main a result of Messi's mesmerising run from half-line where he skilfully evaded Josko Gvardiol to hand the ball to Alvarez in the 'D'. Argentina progressed to the final on the back of a 3-0 win: Messi converted a penalty, while Alvarez scored the other two, including this one in the second half. GETTY IMAGES

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PHOTOLINE
SEMIFINALS

Moment of brilliance: Julian Alvarez was at the forefront of a counterattack in the 39th minute, embarking on a solo run from the Argentine half and taking the ball all the way to the back of the net. It was a brilliant run and Argentina was well on its way to the final. AP

Defying gravity: Morocco's Jawad El Yamiq executes an overhead kick to try to score a goal against France in the second semifinal at the Al Bayt stadium. The ball hit the post. Morocco's inspiring run in the tournament was over with a 2-0 defeat. REUTERS

Final nail in the coffin: Kolo Muani taps the ball in at the far post after receiving a pass from Kylian Mbappe from inside the 'D in the 79th minute. Muani had scored a goal just 44 seconds after coming on as a substitute. Morocco was consigned to a defeat; *Rocky Balboa*'s run had ended. GETTY IMAGES

In the ascendancy: Argentina was 2-0 up and appeared well on its way to the World Cup crown in the 36th minute, when Angel Di Maria scored from a counterattack, tapping the ball in at the far post. The lead was retained till the 79th minute. AP

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PHOTOLINE
FINAL

Comeback: Kylian Mbappe roars after scoring the equaliser in the 81st minute. Two goals in the span of 97 seconds brought France right back in the contest, after it had looked dead and buried. First, Mbappe was shoved inside the box, and he duly converted the penalty; then, he scored another after a nice one-two with Marcus Thuram. Mbappe added a third – again, scoring a penalty – to equalise once more in the 118th minute. AP

Joyous moment: Mbappe's hat-trick notwithstanding, it was Lionel Messi's night at the Lusail Stadium. Argentina won the penalty kicks 4-2 to emerge as the champion. At long last, Messi had the biggest prize in football – the FIFA World Cup. GETTY IMAGES

Long-awaited win: Argentina won the FIFA World Cup after 36 years. After Diego Maradona in 1986, it was time for Lionel Messi to fulfil Argentina's destiny in 2022. GETTY IMAGES

Bright start: Defender Josko Gvardiol (right) chose a good time to score his first goal in the 2022 FIFA World Cup, heading in the ball from a set piece to hand Croatia the lead in the seventh minute during the third-place playoff against Morocco. It was a feather in the cap for Gvardiol, who was rock solid in defence for his team in the competition. Croatia won the contest 2-1, ensuring a third-place finish after being runner-up in 2018. REUTERS

Costly miss: Youssef En-Nesyri reacts after heading the ball over the crossbar in the sixth minute of extra time (after 90 minutes). It was a golden opportunity for Morocco to level the scores and take the contest into extra time. Nonetheless, the fourth-place finish is a remarkable achievement for the North African nation. AP

GOLDEN BALL

LIONEL MESSI

AASHIN PRASAD

AFP

What Lionel Messi achieved at the age of 35 was beyond anyone's wildest imagination. With the 2022 World Cup, he has shattered any lingering criticism that he would have underachieved with his national team. What was even more remarkable was the fact that he did it in a way we haven't seen him do previously in the colours of Argentina.

In years gone by, Messi often appeared to cut a forlorn figure when things didn't go the way of his team. This time around, he has been in the eye of everything good and bad about Argentina. When Saudi Arabia stunned his side in the opening game, he came out and put himself in the glare, asking the fans to believe in this group of players. And even after the wins, he continued to be the face and voice of this team, allowing the others to thrive around him.

On the pitch, he still remained the goal-scorer (7 goals) and the creator (3 assists). He created the second most number of chances in the tournament as he relentlessly dragged Argentina through an emotionally-charged roller-coaster game after game. There was also a spiky edge to him against the opponents which he comfortably embraced in this run.

He even brought out a mix of all his hits: the strike against Mexico in the group stages, the smoothest of passing finish for the goal and the dizzying run from the halfway line against Australia in the Round of 16, the nutmegs, the assist against the Dutch which probably no one in the stadium could see in the quarterfinals and spinning Josko Gvardiol all over Lusail before setting up Julian Alvarez for a goal.

He came into the World Cup with one final appearance, six goals, zero goals in the knockouts and a Golden Ball for what was thought of as his best tournament back in 2014. Hardly a reflection of his talent and legend. After this World Cup, he has a maiden title, 13 goals and eight assists (Argentina's greatest scorer in World Cups), five goals in the knockouts and two Golden Balls. He is the only player to score in all knockout games of an edition. There was always this belief that Messi's talents were destined to match up to the achievements of a World Cup great. In his own terms, Messi has turned the belief into fruition.

ANEESH DEY

France's Kylian Mbappe finished as the Golden Boot winner at the Qatar World Cup 2022 with eight goals. However, he did not have the perfect ending as Argentina beat France 4-2 on penalties in the final match at the Lusail Stadium, preventing the 23-year-old from winning successive World Cups, after he lifted it for the first time in the 2018 edition in Russia.

Mbappe scored his first goal of the World Cup in France's first group-stage match against Australia. In the 68th minute, Ousmane Dembele floated in a wonderful cross from the right, and Mbappe headed the ball into the net to give France a 3-1 lead.

Mbappe scored a brace in France's second match against Denmark to take his tally to three goals. Theo Hernandez and Mbappe played a brilliant one-two as the former set up the latter with a cutback from the left. Mbappe slotted the ball past Kasper Schmeichel with a first-time finish.

Denmark equalised through Andreas Christensen after Mbappe's opener, but the Frenchman found the net again in the 86th minute for the winner. Antoine Griezmann swung in a pinpoint cross from the right, and Mbappe was there at the far-post to bundle the ball over the line.

Mbappe scored a brace again in France's Round of 16 match against Poland. Both goals were absolutely top-notch finishes by the Frenchman. His first goal came in the 74th minute — France launched a counter-attack as Olivier Giroud released Dembele. He cut in and fed Mbappe, who was in space. Mbappe took a touch and lashed a right-footed shot past keeper Wojciech Szczesny.

His second of the match and fifth of the tournament came in second-half additional time. Marcus Thuram fed Mbappe with an inside pass. All Mbappe needed was a touch before finessing the ball to the top-right corner again past a helpless Szczesny.

Mbappe saved his best performance for the final against Argentina, where he scored a hat-trick, becoming just the second player to do so in a World Cup final after Geoff Hurst for England against West Germany in 1966.

The goals came in the 80th, 81st and 118th minutes. The first and third goals came from the spot, while his second, an equaliser for France, came from a wonderful volleyed finish from the edge of the box.

Apart from the eight goals, Mbappe had two assists in the campaign. He is also just the fifth man to score in multiple World Cup finals and the second to score in back-to-back finals.

PRANAY RAJIV

The spotlight will be on Emiliano Martinez and his penalty saves in the final against France and the quarterfinal against Netherlands which won him the golden glove at the Qatar World Cup.

Amidst all that, two of his other interventions — both coming in the dying moments of a knockout game, preserving the scoreline — will be remembered for a long time.

The first came in the Round of 16 clash against Australia when he scampered out of his line to smother a shot from Garang Kuol to protect his side's lead.

The second was an even more significant one, coming in the final. France came back from the dead, flying on the wings of a Kylian Mbappe hat-trick to level the score at 3-3.

In the injury-time of the 30-minute extra-time, French substitute Randal Kolo Muani found himself with the ball inside the Argentine box without a defender in sight. His shot was destined to end in the back of the net to ensure a dramatic win for France, only for Martinez to make himself as wide as the Andes mountain range to push the ball away with his left boot.

The equilibrium was maintained and the stage was set for him to replicate his penalty heroics from the quarterfinals.

His first victim was Kingsley Coman, who had earlier reeled the game back in for France. Next up was Aurelien Tchouameni, and he too couldn't put the ball past Martinez, who by then had acquired an aura of infallibility, aided by his audacious dance moves.

Earlier in the tournament, it was the Dutch who bowed to the Argentine penalty-killer, with Virgil Van Djik and Steven Berghuis the scalps for the 6ft 3in keeper.

No goalkeeper has made more saves in FIFA World Cup shootouts than the 30-year-old Martinez. He shares the top spot with four saves, alongside Croatia's Danijel Subasic and Dominik Livakovic, Argentina's Sergio Goycochea and Germany's Harald Schumacher.

Last year, when asked about Lionel Messi, Martinez said, "I want to give him my life, I want to die for him."

In Qatar 2022, Martinez gifted his living idol something even better — a FIFA World Cup — to provide the most dazzling jewel in Messi's luminous crown.

ARGENTINA VS FRANCE – FINAL

Picture perfect: The Argentine players celebrate victory while the French are dejected, after the final. AP

NEELADRI BHATTACHARJEE

The FIFA World Cup 2022 seemed to have seen everything till December 17 — late equalisers from wily free-kick routines, bizarre celebrations and players being sent off during penalty shootouts.

But the World Cup final changed everything — a game strictly not for the faint-hearted.

Argentina versus France saw Lionel Messi open the scoring from the spot after Ousmane Dembele had tripped Angel Di Maria. Di Maria, who had spent his time warming benches during the knockouts, added a second.

With the score 2-0 six minutes after the half-hour mark, the match looked done — in favour of Argentina.

France, which had multiple players recuperating from a viral outbreak, saw a full-strength squad take the field, but their impact looked shrouded in a cloak of invisibility. Les Blues looked second best, by some distance.

But the World Cup final was not over. Kylian Mbappe, who had become the youngest player since Pele to score in a World Cup final four years ago, started the comeback.

He scored a goal from the spot after Nicolas Otamendi fouled Randal Kolo Muani and, like a bolt of lighting, doubled his tally with a stunning strike on the volley 97 seconds later.

Kingsley Coman won the ball in the midfield and passed it to Mbappe, who passed to Marcus Thuram and got it back to shoot with his shin into the net.

France was back in the game nine minutes before the 90-minute mark.

In extra-time, Argentina regained the lead with Messi scoring his second of the night, the goal coming in the 108th minute. France's hopes to win were shattered again.

Mbappe, the phoenix, rose. Again. Following a hand-ball by Gonzalo Montiel off Mbappe's shot, the referee Szymon Marciniak pointed to the spot.

The 23-year-old converted the penalty to become only the second player after Sir George Hurst to score a hat-trick in a FIFA World Cup final.

When the match trudged into penalties, Mbappe scored, but France — with Aurelien Tchouameni missing the target and Coman seeing his shot saved by Emiliano Martinez — had to succumb to a defeat.

Messi sunk to his knees while the world of white-and-blue rose to a new dawn. A third World Cup trophy for Argentina and the first for the boy from Rosario who finally found his way to the trophy he had heartbreakingly missed eight years ago, in Brazil.

Perfect strike: Wout Weghorst of Netherlands scores his team's second goal against Argentina in the quarterfinals. GETTY IMAGES

WOUT WEGHORST VS ARGENTINA

ABHISHEK SAINI

No team feels the pinch of a World Cup elimination like the Netherlands. The Dutch have been to three finals and fallen short each time. Every new generation has brought with it a star — Johan Cruyff, Dennis Bergkamp, Arjen Robben... A talisman touted as the chosen one to steer the nation home. None could.

In Qatar, Louis Van Gaal's side had no generational talent, but a team that knew how to win. Enjoying a rich vein of form, it arrived in Qatar — unbeaten in 15 games. No one quite termed it as contender but, when thought upon, any manager would want to avoid a confrontation with the Dutch. Their road till the Round of 16 had been smooth. Then came Messi's Argentina in the quarterfinals. The player, the nation that the world wanted to win. And the Netherlands again faced the grim prospect of a World Cup exit.

Till the final quarter of the match, Argentina's passage to the last four seemed settled, devoid of hiccups, interruptions or delays. The South Americans led 2-0 until Wout Weghorst was brought in with 12 minutes of regulation time remaining. The six-foot-six forward scored first in the 83rd minute with a sharp header. Oranje got a sniff and they were not letting the match go. Not without a fight, at least.

For its persistence and relentless attack, the Netherlands was rewarded with a free kick in the 11th minute of stoppage time. That was the last chance, and the team's response to the situation was mind-boggling. It decided to initiate a set-piece routine. Even with a hundred attempts in practice, a free-kick set-piece drill has every chance of going wrong in a match. For the Dutch, at the Lusail Stadium, it did not.

Teun Koopmeiners feigned a shot to slip a pass to Weghorst in the penalty area. The Argentina defence was caught napping. The striker faced the goal with defensive bodies to his left and right but only the keeper in front. Enzo Fernandez made a late tackle but the ball had already beaten keeper Emiliano Martinez. With creativity and audacity, the Dutch had forced extra-time. They eventually lost in the shootout, but the guile to convert the free kick provided one of the most thrilling moments of the World Cup.

HEROES IN THE MAKING

Since its inception, the World Cup has always been a platform where several young players have announced themselves on the global stage: from Pele for Brazil in the 1958 World Cup to Kylian Mbappe for France in 2018. With the 2022 edition having ended in Qatar, here are five youngsters who stood out in this World Cup.

GETTY IMAGES

Enzo Fernandez (Argentina)

When Argentina came into this World Cup on the back of a 36-match unbeaten run, Enzo Fernandez, who had three international appearances under his belt, was relatively unknown and was not expected to be a key player.

But all that changed when the team struggled to connect defence to attack in the opening two games. While he scored a stunning goal in the win over Mexico, Enzo's attributes were better served as the sitting midfielder in front of the defence.

His passing and ball progression allowed Argentina's talisman Lionel Messi to cause havoc in the final third of the pitch. The 21-year-old started the last five games in Argentina's run to the title and had the most successful passes (77) and tackles (10) in the final.

With the 'Best Young Player' award, the Benfica midfielder has thrust himself into the spotlight and will soon have suitors queuing up from among the best in Europe.

Josko Gvardiol (Croatia)

Croatia's Josko Gvardiol has undoubtedly been a revelation of the Qatar World Cup.

The 20-year-old left-footed centre-back of RB Leipzig caught everyone's attention with his solid and no-nonsense approach to defending.

Playing every minute of his country's World Cup campaign, Gvardiol was initially noticed because of his facemask (as a precautionary measure for an injury). By the end of Croatia's World Cup campaign, Gvardiol stood out as one of the best youngsters in this World Cup.

In terms of statistics, Gvardiol has been impressive. He had 44 recoveries — a tournament-leading figure. He had eight interceptions and ranks second (behind the Netherlands' Jurrien Timber, who had 10).

Gvardiol is a balanced defender, evident in his efficiency in aerial and ground tackling. This, along with his excellent understanding of positioning, allowed him to anticipate attacking threats from the opposition.

He also scored in Croatia's 2-1 win against Morocco in the third-place match, where he netted the first goal with a diving header, becoming his country's youngest-ever World Cup scorer at 20 years and 328 days.

AFP

GETTY IMAGES

Aurelien Tchouameni (France)

Defending FIFA World Cup champion France faced several injury woes before the tournament began in Qatar, including the Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema. But Didier Deschamps' most important task was to find replacements for its midfield maestros Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante.

This is where Real Madrid's new recruit, Aurelien Tchouameni came in. The 22-year-old replaced Kante in the midfield and had started every match for Les Blues in the World Cup.

Against England, he decided to put his foot on the gas and struck a stunning long ranger to find the bottom-left corner, giving France the lead.

Up to the final, defensively, the midfielder had the most interceptions in the World Cup (12) — according to *Opta* — followed by Declan Rice (11) and Jurrien Timber (10).

France may have failed to defend its crown after losing 2-4 to Argentina on penalties, but Tchouameni will be a testimony of France's bright future and squad depth in the years to come.

Julian Alvarez (Argentina)

GETTY IMAGES

Julian Alvarez will probably tell his grandkids about 2022. Having already completed a headline transfer to Manchester City in the summer, the 22-year-old found a spot in Argentina's squad to Qatar for the World Cup.

The ticket to Qatar, however, was only for a second-choice striker — a deputy to Lautaro Martinez. Lautaro was the go-to man for La Albiceleste. He was the senior and had been part of the Copa America triumph.

But Lionel Scaloni, adamant on refreshing the permutations with his lineups at the quadrennial event, gave Alvarez a start in the last group stage game against Poland. That was all Alvarez needed. He scored against Poland, then against Australia, and another two against Croatia.

By the time the final beckoned, Alvarez had scored four and was contending for the Golden Boot. Though he could not extend his tally in the final against France, Alvarez proved an able deputy for Lionel Messi.

He not only forged a place in Argentina's starting XI but also guided its progress with crucial goals. For his exploits at the World Cup — poise in finishing and ability to shoulder responsibility — Alvarez might just become a mainstay in the Blue and White colours.

Jude Bellingham (England)

AP

In 2020, a lot of eyebrows were raised when Birmingham City retired its No. 22 jersey worn by a 16-year-old, who was moving on to a German side.

"In such a remarkably short space of time, he has become an iconic figure at Blues, showing what can be achieved through talent, hard work and dedication," the club said.

The teenager — Jude Bellingham — has gone on to prove his former club right with a stirring performance on the European stage for Borussia Dortmund and at the World Cup as England's youngest player in Qatar.

With a goal in England's 6-2 mauling of Iran in the group stage, he became the second-youngest scorer for his side in World Cups.

Despite crashing out to France in the quarterfinals, the English side had a lot of positives to take, includiong the performance of Bellingham.

Slotted in the midfield role, the 19-year-old was all enterprise as he went on to dominate the midfield for the Three Lions, with no player making more tackles and interceptions for England than Bellingham.

With Declan Rice, too, in its ranks, England has a young midfield platform to build its future sides upon.

Aashin Prasad, Neeladri Bhattacharjee, Aneesh Dey, Pranay Rajiv & Abhishek Saini

Muchachos, now we can dream again

Soon after the victory, the Argentine players were in the midst of their people, taking an open-top bus-ride in the busy street of Lusail and singing their song.

AYON SENGUPTA

The night is almost over, but the celebrations refuse to take a break. Every Argentinian is on *FaceTime*, their cries of joy mixing with the hooting of Malayalis. This game — already said to be the best ever in a World Cup — had been nerve-wracking. The whole stadium had lived a lifetime in that last hour when Kylian Mbappe equalised and ensured this finale in Doha was not just a Lionel Messi swansong.

Messi scored, but Mbappe scored again and then again (in the shootout), and the Argentinian victory came after much pain, much like their every game.

The passions had spilled into the tight-collared Press tribune, the emotional roller-coaster a bit much for the scribes to remember a deadline loomed. Hugs, fist pumps and the out-of-control lacrimal glands had taken over the most seasoned hacks. They, as well, had never witnessed something as primal as this. Messi, too, cried and with him the whole of Argentina — the country needed this.

And when he lifted the Cup, capped by the Arab ceremonial *bisht* conferred to him by the Emir of the Land (Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani), the scene was truly ceremonial for the coronation of the man, and all debates settled that very moment.

He was soon on the shoulders of Sergio Aguero, who had missed a place in the squad but was here to lift his old friend as the disciples from the stands used every means available — mobile phone cameras, modern contraptions with larger-than-arms telephoto lenses, or just good old eyes — to capture memories for a lifetime.

The eager journalists waiting for the million-dollar byte in the mixed zone were greeted by the songs of the heroes who had won. The lyrics — "Support the national team, support them to the death because I love Argentina, because it's an emotion I carry in my heart. And I don't care what those f****g journalists say" — were not very flattering but we laughed along as the World Cup winners danced and the others jostled to get a video of them.

There has always been a strained relationship between the Argentine national team and its Press since the Maradona days. El Diego had sung, "They are like pancakes: they flip one way and then the other" in the flight back home about the Argentina football federation in 1986, and here the team of 2022 was doing the same.

Soon they were in the midst of their people, taking an open-top bus-ride in the busy street of Lusail and we were back at our desks, the 20 missed calls reminding us about the deadline missed, and the jibe was long forgotten.

The stories were dispatched in a jiffy as a party was waiting. The Argentinian media, keeping their superstitions aside, had booked the *Oasis* (literally a beer-filled oasis in the middle of this dry desert) at the main media centre for 19000 Riyals a day before the final in anticipation of the win they were sure of coming. Like the team, they, too, believed in the song that had become Argentina's anthem.

Everyone was invited and their joy was ours too. (We don't know about the French.)

And we sang as the sun rose after the magical night.

The Song

Muchachos, esta noche me emborracho,
En Argentina nací, tierra de Diego y Lionel / de los pibes de Malvinas que jamás olvidaré
No te lo puedo explicar, porque no vas a entender / las finales que perdimos, cuántos años las lloré
Pero eso se terminó porque en el Maracaná / la final con los brazucas la volvió a ganar papá.
Muchachos, ahora nos volvimos a ilusionar. Quiero ganar la tercera, quiero ser campeón mundial.
Y al Diego en el cielo lo podemos ver / con Don Diego y con la Tota, alentándolo a Lionel

The Translation

Boys, tonight I'll get drunk,
I was born in Argentina, land of Diego and Lionel / of the boys from the Falklands that I'll never forget
I can't explain it because you won't understand / the finals that we lost, I've grieved them for so long
But it's all over now because at the Maracana / we won that final against the Brazilians
Boys, now we can dream again. I want to win the third (World Cup), I want to be a world champion.
We can see Diego in heaven alongside Don Diego and la Tota (Maradona's parents), supporting Lionel.

Party time: The victorious Argentine players celebrate with the trophy on a bus outside the Lusail Stadium. REUTERS

"Let's go! We are world champions... It's crazy that it has happened this way. I wanted it very much. I knew God was going to give it to me, I sensed it was going to be this. Now to enjoy."
– MESSI'S FIRST WORDS AFTER WINNING THE FINAL.

"Congratulations Argentina! Certainly, Diego is smiling now."
– PELE POSTED ON INSTAGRAM AFTER ARGENTINA WON THE WORLD CUP.

"Even if we'd won, I wouldn't reply to that question tonight. Obviously I am very sad. I will have a meeting with the president at the start of the new year and you will know after that."
– FRANCE COACH DIDIER DESCHAMPS ON HIS FUTURE AS HEAD COACH AFTER LOSS AGAINST ARGENTINA IN FINAL.

"We gave it all. The dream of a team, of a whole country, is over. But we have to be proud of what we have done. We fought until the last second and we leave with our heads held high. We will continue to try and give our all for this nation. Thanks to all Moroccans for your support."
– ACHRAF HAKIMI ON MOROCCO'S EXIT AFTER SEMIS LOSS AGAINST FRANCE.

"We showed that Croatia has a great team, with a very good future ahead and we must continue on that path. In the future we will see what happens. I want to continue until the Nations League and then we'll see what happens."
– LUKA MODRIC ON HIS FUTURE AFTER CROATIA'S WIN AGAINST MOROCCO IN THE THIRD-PLACE MATCH.

"Nous reviendrons (We will return)"
– KYLIAN MBAPPE'S TWEET AFTER FRANCE'S LOSS AGAINST ARGENTINA IN THE WORLD CUP FINAL.

"If he wants to keep playing, he will be with us. He is more than entitled to decide whether he wants to keep playing for Argentina or not or what he wants to do with his career. He is such a huge player for us. It is such a pleasure for us to coach him and his team-mates. Everything he transmits to his team-mates is unparalleled – something I've never seen before."
– LIONEL SCALONI ON WHETHER MESSI WILL PLAY IN THE 2026 WORLD CUP.

"As the captain, I'll take that on the chin and that responsibility."
– ENGLAND CAPTAIN HARRY KANE AFTER A MISSED PENALTY PROVES CRUCIAL IN A 2-1 QUARTERFINAL LOSS TO FRANCE.

"Sadly the dream ended. It's not worth reacting in the heat of the moment. I just want you all to know that much has been said, much has been written, much has been speculated, but my dedication to Portugal has not changed, not for a moment. I was always one fighting for the objective of all and I would never turn my back on my colleagues and my country. Not much more to say for now. Thank you Portugal. Thank you Qatar. The dream was nice while it lasted... Now, it's hoping that time will be good advisor and allow each one to draw their own conclusions.
– CRISTIANO RONALDO ON PORTUGAL EXIT AFTER QUARTERS LOSS AGAINST MOROCCO.

"I am psychologically destroyed. It is definitely the defeat which has hurt me the most, which left me paralysed for 10 minutes after the match, after which I burst into tears without being able to stop."
– DISTRAUGHT BRAZIL STAR NEYMAR AFTER HIS TEAM'S SHOCK EXIT TO CROATIA.

When it happens this way, it feels like watching like a horror movie."
– KAI HAVERTZ AFTER GERMANY'S STUNNING FIRST-ROUND EXIT.

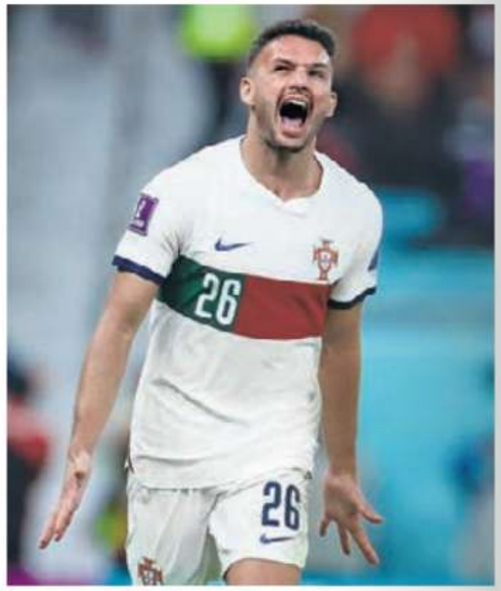
Over a year ago, in one of the Spain camps, I told them they had to get here with at least 1,000 penalties taken."
– COACH LUIS ENRIQUE BEFORE SPAIN'S ROUND OF 16 MATCH AGAINST MOROCCO. (SPAIN ULTIMATELY LOST TO MOROCCO ON PENALTIES).

I don't know if (mine) will be on his wall at home or maybe still on the ground in that changing room but I'm not fussed – it's more that I got his ... I was surprised he even took mine."
– AUSTRALIA MIDFIELDER CAMERON DEVLIN AFTER MANAGING TO EXCHANGE SHIRTS WITH LIONEL MESSI AFTER ARGENTINA'S ROUND OF 16 WIN AGAINST THE SOCCEROOS.

When you watch Rocky, you want to support Rocky Balboa because of his hard work and commitment and I think we're the Rocky Balboa of this World Cup."
– MOROCCO COACH WALID REGRAGUI SUMS UP HIS TEAM'S UNDERDOG SPIRIT.

This is a joy that I cannot explain. I am proud to have been born in this country. Today we leave it on top of the world."
– RODRIGO DE PAUL AFTER ARGENTINA'S WORLD CUP WIN.

I think not even in my wildest dreams I thought about being in the starting XI for the knockout phase."
– GONCALO RAMOS OF PORTUGAL AFTER HIS HAT-TRICK AGAINST SWITZERLAND IN THE ROUND OF 16 MATCH.



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MESMERISING FANS DESPITE WORLD CUP FEVER

Ivan Vukomanovic, the Kerala Blasters head coach, gave a hint of what could be running in the mind of an away fan in Kochi.

Die-hard fans: "We are so pleased and happy when we see the yellow sea around, especially the feeling when we go out of the tunnel, it's priceless. We like to give everything for them. Of course, away-team supporters, they know when they are coming to Kochi it will be all about the Kerala Blasters supporters because the game is in Kochi. That's how it is in football," Ivan Vukomanovic, the Blasters head coach, said. THULASI KAKKAT

Life can be really difficult when you are an 'away-team' fan arriving in Kochi's Nehru Stadium for a Kerala Blasters match in the Indian Super League.

Ivan Vukomanovic, the Blasters head coach, gave a hint of what could be running in the mind of an away fan in Kochi.

"Let's be honest, when you as an away-team fan arrive in a stadium of 35,000 or 40,000 people and when you are not even in hundreds, then you feel insecure, you feel intimidated, especially when you come and play in Kochi," said the Serb whose team is enjoying a wonderful winning streak in the ISL.

"We all know what kind of atmosphere awaits you here. Of course, it will be hot because, as the home team and home supporters we know how they support Kerala Blasters. So, I'm very sorry if there were any unpredictable things, or ugly things, but you know their emotions and I hope everybody is safe. I hope all the fans will behave well and everybody will be okay."

He said the feeling is sort of magical for the Blasters players when they see huge crowds turn up to cheer them at home.

"We are so pleased and happy when we see the yellow sea around, especially the feeling when we go out of the tunnel, it's priceless. We like to give everything for them. Of course, away-team supporters know that when they are coming to Kochi it will be all about the Kerala Blasters supporters because the game is in Kochi. That's how it is in football."

But things have gone a little too far, as one recent match showed.

The Blasters club officials have now decided to impose a fine of Rs. 5 lakh on pitch invaders. That had been an issue in a few recent Blasters home games in Kochi.

"Action — including a fine of Rs. 5 lakh and a ban on matches — will be taken against individuals who cause injury or threaten the safety of players and officials in coming matches," said the Blasters statement.

Cheerleaders

Just like in any other sport, the last couple of years have been challenging for Mumbai's football fans. Since the two previous editions of the Indian Super League were held in a bio-bubble, there were restrictions on fans entering the stadium.

But this year, things are different. Every time Mumbai City FC plays its home games at the Mumbai Football Arena, located in one of the busiest areas of Andheri, thousands of local fans throng the stadium.

In 2020-2021, Mumbai City FC became the first club in the history of the ISL to do a double by winning the League Shield and trophy. However, the following season the Islanders couldn't manage to break into the top-four at the end of the season.

And, this time around, fans like those of the West Coast Brigade have made it a point to cheer for the team every time Des Buckingham's men take the pitch.

"The Mumbai Football Arena is a smaller stadium and the pitch is closer. You can easily read the game from that close. It's easier to create a vibe with our chants. From inception to winning the double, it has been a great journey. It's very difficult to express in words," Anand, a die-hard Mumbai City FC fan, said.

The return of home games have been marked with chants, a team bus welcome, and a flare show. The fans have also added a march from one end of the arena to the other.

"We are having a full house for most of the games this time and fans are excited to be back in the stadiums and cheer for their favourite players. Mumbai fans had missed out on all the action for two years and now they are cherishing each and every bit of it," a Mumbai City FC official said.

After watching the proceedings on television over the last two seasons, the West Coast Brigade is happy to be back to its den. And they want to make every moment memorable!

Stan Rayan & Shayan Acharya

Showing their love: The return of Mumbai City FC's home games have been marked with chants, a team bus welcome, and a flare show. The fans have also added a march from one end of the arena to the other. ISL

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EQUAL PAY DECISION DELIGHTS ALL

The focus was on the women at the fourth edition of the Tata Steel Chess India. It was for the first time that a women's event was being conducted in India's only world-class annual chess tournament. The organisers made it even more special by having equal pay – both the men's and women's champions got the same prize fund.

Winners all: (From left) Nihal Sarin (Rapid, men), Arjun Erigaisi (Blitz, men), Anna Ushenina (Rapid, women) and R. Vaishali (Blitz, women). DEBASISH BHADURI

P. K. AJITH KUMAR

The woman at the lobby of Taj Bengal in Kolkata is busy taking selfies on her mobile phone. She smiles as she looks at the phone's front camera from different angles. The hotel is rather crowded, which isn't surprising: the wedding season is in full swing. Anyone would have assumed that the wo-

Good show: India's Harika Dronavalli in action against Georgia's Nana Dzagnidze. Harika finished third in both sections for women. PTI

man with the phone is one of those wedding guests. She looks the part too, dressed in a saree. Few would have recognised her as Nana Dzagnidze, the 2017 World blitz chess champion.

The Georgian came to Kolkata for the Tata Steel Chess India tournament. She isn't the only woman dressed up in a saree for the evening's closing ceremony, at the nearby National Library. All the 10 female participants are. Little wonder they are the centre of attraction on the stage.

The focus was on the women's event at the fourth edition of the Tata Steel Chess India. It was for the first time that a women's event was being conducted in India's only world-class annual chess tournament. The organisers made it even more special by having equal pay for both the men's and the women's champions.

The tournament may have taken place after the BCCI's well-received announcement that India's men and women cricketers would get the same match fee, but the organisers of the chess tournament had taken the decision long before. "When we decided to have a women's tournament, we wanted it to have equal prize money," Jeet Banerjee, Managing Director of *Gameplan* (the Kolkata-based corporate branding agency that conducts the tournament on behalf of Tata Steel), tells *Sportstar*. "And we have been delighted with the response; everyone, even from outside chess circles, welcomed our decision."

Needless to say, the participating women at the tournament were delighted. "I don't remember a (chess) tournament where the prize fund was the same for both men and women," said Ukraine's Anna Muzychuk at the opening ceremony, "because such a tournament didn't exist."

Another Ukrainian woman was among those who benefited most from the organisers' decision on the prize-fund. Anna Ushenina, the 2012 World champion, won the rapid section of the tournament after beating Dzagnidze in the tie-breaker. They were tied on 6.5 points from nine rounds (10 players met one another once). Ushenina won both the games in the tie-breaker to win the title.

Back in August in Chennai, she had won her game in the final round of the Chess Olympiad to give Ukraine the gold in the women's section in what has been one of the stories of the year in world sport. For a country ravaged by a brutal war, that was a rare moment of happiness. Ushenina and the Muzychuk sisters (Mariya also played in Kolkata) were part of that team. "I think I should only play in India," Ushenina said after her triumph.

Dronavalli Harika was the best Indian performer in the women's rapid event, finishing third. Three days later, she took third place in the blitz event too, but it was her younger compatriot who stole the show. R. Vaishali winning the blitz title is one of the best things to have happened in Indian women's chess in recent times. The women's game in India has only been making slow progress, compared to men's chess, in which the country has a host of outstanding young talents who have been making headlines almost on a daily basis.

Chennai-based Vaishali's younger brother R. Praggnanandhaa, who played in the blitz section, though with no great success, is one of them. The 21-year-old Vaishali has been overshadowed by her prodigious sibling for much of her career, but her talent had never been in doubt. Her stunning and rather convincing victory in Kolkata — by a margin of 1.5 points over her nearest rival Mariya — could well be a turning point in her career.

Vaishali's performance also showed what exposure to such quality tournaments could do to talented Indian youngsters. Sadly, until Tata Steel brought this event to Kolkata, back in 2018, there was no such high-profile tournament in the country. The All India Chess Federation should have tried to conduct such events; its focus has been more on open GM tournaments.

Five-time World champion Viswanathan Anand had once told this correspondent that he would have loved to play such a tournament in India. In his prime, he never got that opportunity and that was an even bigger loss for players like Krishnan Sasikiran and Pentala Harikrishna. Anand played in the inaugural Tata Steel tournament in Kolkata in 2018, and won the blitz event, a month before he turned 49. Fortunately, members of the golden generation of Indian chess have been able to play in the tournament when they are young enough. They have made good use of the opportunities, too. Remarkably, both the rapid and blitz sections were won by Indian teenagers — Nihal Sarin (rapid) and Arjun Erigaisi.

They came on top of the field ahead of some of the biggest stars in international chess such as Americans Hikaru Nakamura and Wesley So, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov of Azerbaijan and Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan. Arjun had also finished runner-up in the rapid event.

In the last edition of the tournament, it was the other way around for him: he had won the rapid event and secured the second spot in blitz. Last year, he had started as an outsider and got to play the blitz section only because B. Adhiban had pulled out. The tournament thus proved to be beneficial in his career.

Vidit Gujrathi also did well to take the third place in the rapid event. In the blitz tournament — as Anand pointed out during the media briefings — he was the oldest Indian player, at the age of 28. That fact alone shows how promising the road ahead is for Indian chess.

Let's play: Grandmaster Viswanathan Anand at the draw. The former world champion also did a good job as a journalist during the media briefings. DEBASISH BHADURI

Crowning glory: Lionel Messi kisses the FIFA World Cup trophy after Argentina's win over France in the final. If Messi decides to quit football now, he will do so on a high. REUTERS

A fairytale finish

Till last year, Lionel Messi had plenty of club championship titles in his kitty but had never won a title with his national team. Now, he has fulfilled his dream of lifting the biggest prize in football: the FIFA World Cup. Will it be just the inspiration the Indian cricket team needs to try and make it to the ICC World Test Championship final?

The story is now complete. And it has a happy ending.

The chieftain, who only last year became a king, has now conquered the world. Till last year, Lionel Messi was part of teams that won club championships but had never won a title with his national team. It changed last year when Messi, arguably the best player in the world, led Argentina to the Copa America title; now, he has clinched the FIFA World Cup.

The FIFA World Cup in Qatar was Messi's fifth and – in all probability, considering he is in his mid-30s – his last World Cup. Every player knows that there's nothing like winning the World Cup: it's not just a personal achievement but lifts the whole country. Even those who may not be sports fans may be thrilled by their country's success. Winning national championships is big, but winning for the country is an experience to be cherished because it doesn't happen too often.

Messi was named the player of the final, but many at the stadium felt Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez should have won that award. After all, had he not made that brilliant save in the dying seconds of extra time (121st minute), France would have won the title for the second time in four years. That wasn't to be, and Messi's ambition of lifting the FIFA World Cup was fulfilled. If he decides to quit now, he will do so on a high, unlike the person he is often compared to: Cristiano Ronaldo.

Ronaldo had to face the ignominy of being benched for the last two games. The Portugal team manager who did that has now been sacked. Whether he was sacked for the inability of Portugal to get through to the semifinals or for making Ronaldo come on as a substitute will not be known. Fact remains that his decision to bench Ronaldo did make waves; it's like the coach of the Indian cricket team asking Virat Kohli to bat at No. 8.

Talking of cricket, the Indian team's win in the first Test against Bangladesh increases its chances of making it to the World Test Championship final. Admittedly, it needs to win four of its next five Test matches to get there, but as they say, well begun is half done. Cheteshwar Pujara got a Test century after a long time; it turned out to be his fastest in terms of deliveries faced. He also scored a gritty 90 in the first innings, digging India out of a hole. It was his partnership with Shreyas Iyer that steadied the ship, and thanks to significant contributions with the bat from R. Ashwin and Kuldeep Yadav, India was able to post a 400-plus total.

Kuldeep showed a welcome return to form, picking up five wickets in the first innings and three in the second to pip Pujara for the player of the match award. It was a hard-fought win for India as the pitch got a lot better than on day one when the ball turned a fair bit. The pitch at Dhaka for the second Test might be a bit flatter, meaning more hard work in store for the Indian team. The team is looking nicely balanced to ace the test.

By all accounts, the Indian team has a lot of Messi fans, and it is hoped that Messi's World Cup win will be just the inspiration the boys need to win the next few Tests and give themselves a shot at the ICC World Test Championship.

Welcome return: Kuldeep Yadav, playing his first Test since March 2021, had a significant role in India's 188-run victory over Bangladesh at Chattogram. He took eight wickets and excelled with the bat, too, scoring a career-best 40. AP

Ishan Kishan's day out

While playing in only the 10th ODI of his career, Ishan Kishan set a new record by registering the quickest double hundred in men's ODIs. Thanks to his blitzkrieg, India thumped Bangladesh by 227 runs in the final ODI of the three-match series at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram ZAC on 10 December 2022.

Incidentally, India recorded its third-largest victory in terms of runs against any opponent in ODIs. However, this win is the best against any Test-playing nation. Two of India's bigger ODI victories have come against Bermuda (by 257 runs) in the 2007 World Cup and against Hong Kong (by 256 runs) in the 2008 Asia Cup.

Kishan, who got the opportunity to open in the innings in place of an injured Rohit Sharma, took the Bangladesh bowlers to the cleaners and hit 24 fours and 10 sixes during his scintillating knock of 210 off 131 deliveries.

The tables below (of men's ODIs) will provide details of the various records Kishan set while doing so.

103 **The number of balls taken by India's Ishan Kishan to bring up his 150th run during his knock** of 210 in the ChattogramZAC ODI on 10 December 2022. It is now the quickest by any Indian batter in ODI cricket. For the record, the fastest to reach the 150th run in an ODI match, i.e. in fewest number of balls, is South African AB de Villiers who made an unbeaten 162 in just 66 balls against the West Indies in Sydney on 27 February 2015.

Quickest to 150 runs by an Indian in ODI cricket (in fewest balls)

Balls	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	Against	Venue	Date	Result
103	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
113	Virender Sehwag	(219 in 149)	WI	Indore	8 Dec 2011	Won
117	Rohit Sharma	(152* in 117)	WI	Guwahati	21 Oct 2018	Won

126 **The number of balls required for Ishan Kishan to reach his 200th run** in the ChattogramZAC ODI. It is now the quickest in terms of balls faced by any batter in ODI history. The previous record was off 138 balls held by West Indian Chris Gayle during his 215 (in 147 balls) against Zimbabwe in Canberra on 24 February 2015.

Quickest to reach the 200th run in an ODI match (in fewest balls)

Balls	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
126	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
138	Chris Gayle	(215 In 147)	WI	Zim	Canberra	24 Feb 2015	Won
140	Virender Sehwag	(219 in 149)	Ind	WI	Indore	8 Dec 2011	Won
147	Sachin Tendukar	(200* in 147)	Ind	SA	Gwalior	24 Feb 2010	Won
148	Fakhar Zaman	(210* in 156)	Pak	Zim	Bulawayo	2018	Won

160.30 **The batting run rate (runs per 100 balls) for Ishan Kishan,** during his knock of 210 in 131 balls at ChattogramZAC. It is now the fastest individual score of 200+ in ODI cricket. Incidentally, Ishan became the seventh ODI batter to go past 200+ for the ninth time (with teammate Rohit Sharma doing so on three occasions). Rohit Sharma achieved the previous highest run rate of 152.60 during his record-breaking knock of 264 in 173 balls against Sri Lanka in Kolkata on 13 November 2014.

Fastest 200-plus scores by batters in ODI cricket

Run rate	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
160.30	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
152.60	Rohit Sharma	(264 in 173)	Ind	SL	Kolkata	13 Nov 2014	Won
146.97	Virender Sehwag	(219 in 149)	Ind	WI	Indore	8 Dec 2011	Won
146.25	Chris Gayle	(215 In 147)	WI	Zim	Canberra	24 Feb 2015	Won
145.39	Martin Guptill	(237* in 163)	NZ	WI	Wellington S	21 Mar 2015	Won

210 **Ishan Kishan's final score in the ChattogramZAC ODI.** It is now the first individual score of 200+ made by any batter against Bangladesh in an ODI match. Previously, Zimbabwean Charles Coventry registered an unbeaten 194 against Bangladesh in Bulawayo in August 2009. However, Bangladesh managed to win the match despite Coventry's effort.

Highest ODI scores made against Bangladesh

Runs	Balls	Batter	For	Venue	Date	Result
210	131	Ishan Kishan	In	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
194*	156	Charles Coventry	Zimb	Bulawayo	16 Aug 2009	Lost
185*	96	Shane Watson	Aus	Mirpur	11 Apr 2011	Won
176	104	AB de Villiers	SA	Paarl	18 Oct 2017	Won
175	140	Virender Sehwag	Ind	Mirpur	19 Feb 2011	Won

1 **The number of batters registering a double century** as the maiden three-figure score in their ODI career. Ishan at ChattogramZAC also went ahead of Kapil Dev's historic unbeaten 175 at Tunbridge Wells during the 1983 World Cup on 18 June 1983. It, incidentally, was the only century of Kapil's ODI career that spanned 16 years.

Highest scores while registering maiden ODI century

Runs	Balls	Batter	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
210	131	Ishan Kishan	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
194*	156	Charles Coventry	Zim	Ban	Bulawayo	16 Aug 2009	Lost
179	137	John Campbell	WI	Ire	Dublin	5 May 2019	Won
177	134	Paul Stirling	Ire	Can	Toronto	7 Sep 2010	Won
175*	138	Kapil Dev	Ind	Zim	Tunbridge Wells	18 Jun 1983	Won

9 **The number of innings Ishan Kishan needed to register** the first double-century of his ODI career. He becomes the first player to achieve this milestone while playing less than 10 innings. Previously, Pakistani Fakhar Zaman took 17 innings when he registered the first double of his ODI career. To put Ishan's knock in perspective, Sachin Tendulkar achieved his maiden 200 (against South Africa at Gwalior on 24 Feb 2010) in his 431st innings.

Fewest innings to reach maiden double century in ODIs

Inns	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
9	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
17	Fakhar Zaman	(210* in 156)	Pak	Zim	Bulawayo	20 Jul 2018	Won
103	Rohit Sharma	(209 in 158)	Ind	Aus	Bengaluru	2 Nov 2013	Won
103	Martin Guptill	(237* in 163)	NZ	WI	Wellington S	21 Mar 2015	Won

24 **Ishan Kishan's age during his double-century knock** in the ChattogramZAC ODI makes him the youngest to do so. Rohit was 26 years and 186 days when he first reached his maiden double in November 2013. The second table below provides details of the youngest batters to achieve each batting milestone in ODI cricket.

Youngest to an ODI double century

Age, days	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
24y-145d	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
26y-186d	Rohit Sharma	(209 in 158)	Ind	Aus	Bengaluru	2 Nov 2013	Won
27y-197d	Rohit Sharma	(264 in 173)	Ind	SL	Kolkata	13 Nov 2014	Won
28y-101d	Fakhar Zaman	(210* in 156)	Pak	Zim	Bulawayo	20 Jul 2018	Won
28y-172d	Martin Guptill	(237* in 163)	NZ	WI	Wellington S	21 Mar 2015	Won

Youngest to reach these milestones in an ODI match

Score	Age, days	Batter	(Runs &Balls faced)	For	Against	Venue	Date	Result
50	15y-340d	Kushal Mulla	(50 in 51)	Nep	USA	Kiritipur	8 Feb 2020	Won
100	16y-217d	Shahid Afridi	(102 in 40)	Pak	SL	Nairobi Gym	4 Oct 1996	Won
150	20y-4d	Paul Stirling	(177 in 134)	Ire	Can	Toronto	7 Sep 2010	Won
200	24y-145d	Ishan Kishan	(210 in 131)	Ind	Ban	ChattogramZAC	10 Dec 2022	Won
250	27y-197d	Rohit Sharma	(264 in 173)	Ind	SL	Kolkata	13 Nov 2014	Won

All records are correct and updated until 17 December 2022

Shakib floors India: Captain Shakib Al Hasan set the ball rolling for Bangladesh in the first ODI in Mirpur. His five-wicket haul bundled a loaded Indian side for 186. AFP

Tigers step up: While a tricky run-chase almost went down familiar routes, Mehidy Hasan Miraz's steely cameo (38 not out from 39 balls) helped Bangladesh pip India by one wicket in the first ODI. AFP

Miraz miracle, again: India bounced back in the second ODI in Mirpur by reducing Bangladesh to 69 for six in 17 overs. However, the Men in Blue failed to ace the kill as No. 8 batter Mehidy Hasan slammed his maiden ODI ton to propel Bangladesh to 271 for seven. AFP

Hitman heroics fall short: India's batters froze in the 272-run chase and captain Rohit Sharma surprisingly walked out at No. 9 after a dislocated thumb and a hospital visit. Rohit thumped an unbeaten 55 with eight boundaries, but it wasn't enough to stop Bangladesh from clinching the series with a five-run win. AFP

Kishan dance in Chattogram: In his rare chance up top in Rohit Sharma's absence, Ishan Kishan revelled in a spectacular onslaught against Bangladesh in the third ODI. Kishan coasted to a record-breaking double century (210) as India posted its third-highest ODI total of 409/8. AFP

No. 72 to break ODI duck: Virat Kohli ended his ODI century drought of over three years with a resurgent 85-ball ton – his 72nd international century – in his last ODI of 2022 which resulted in a consolatory 227-run win for India. AFP

Gill breaks through: Shubman Gill hit his maiden Test hundred in the third innings of the first Test against Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium. The only other time Gill had scored 90-plus in the format was against Australia in a historic chase at the Gabba in 2020-21. In Chattogram, Gill reverse-swept Mehidy Miraz for four to move from 95 to 99 before bringing up the three-figure mark with another four. He got to his hundred off just 147 balls and added 113 for the second wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara. AFP

Pujara ends long drought: Cheteshwar Pujara scored his first Test hundred since January 2019. This was Pujara's first century in 52 innings and the fastest of his career as India declared on 258 for 2, setting Bangladesh a target of 513. Pujara shifted gears seamlessly during his innings – he reached his fifty off 87 deliveries, but took only 43 more to get to his hundred. AP

Zakir's riposte: Left-handed opener Zakir Khan scored a Test hundred in his debut and was the silver lining for Bangladesh. Zakir, who spearheaded Bangladesh's fightback in the final innings, fell for 100 when he inside-edged R. Ashwin to Virat Kohli at slip. He got his maiden call-up after scoring 173 in a four-day game against India A, which helped the host side draw the match. Zakir was the highest run-scorer – 442 at 56.25 – in this season's National Cricket League, Bangladesh's first-class competition. AP

INDIA VS BANGLADESH IST TEST

PHOTOLINE

Spinning a web: Left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav took a match haul of 8 for 113 against Bangladesh, including a five-for in the second innings. Kuldeep has bowled in 14 Test innings, and has taken four or more wickets in five of those. Kuldeep and left-arm finger-spinner Axar Patel shared seven wickets in the fourth innings as India registered a 188-run win. India is now second on the World Test Championship points table. AP

Kane Williamson steps down as New Zealand Test captain

Kane Williamson has decided to give up his role as captain of New Zealand in Test matches. Veteran Tim Southee will replace him as captain and starts his tenure in the tour of Pakistan.

Williamson will continue to lead New Zealand in ODIs and T20Is.

"For me, Test cricket is the pinnacle of the game and I've enjoyed the challenges of leading the side in the format. Captaincy comes with an increased workload on and off the field and at this stage of my career I feel the time is right for this decision," said Williamson, who captained his team in 40 Tests from 2016 to 2022.

Southee, 34, said it was a "massive honour" to be appointed as the Test captain.

GETTY IMAGES

England's dream run in Tests continues

England won the first two Tests of a three-Test series against host Pakistan to clinch its third series win in that country. By winning two matches, 'Baz' McCullum and Ben Stokes made history: it's the first time that any England team has won two Test matches in the same tour of Pakistan (England's series wins in 1961 and 2000 were both on the back of one win).

Both Tests went down to the wire.

Meanwhile, senior batter Azhar Ali said he will retire after the third and final Test in Karachi.

GETTY IMAGES

Australia trounces West Indies, South Africa

Australia beat West Indies comprehensively in two Tests to retain the Frank Worrell trophy. Australia scored more than 500 runs in the first innings in both the Tests — in Perth and Adelaide — to set itself up for victories by big margins. Marnus Labuschagne was the player of the series for scoring more than 500 runs in four innings.

The first Test — in Brisbane — of a three-Test series between Australia and South Africa ended within two days, Australia winning by six wickets. Both sets of batters struggled against fast bowlers on a difficult surface.

Arjun Tendulkar emulates father Sachin

Arjun Tendulkar scored a century on his first-class debut for Goa against Rajasthan at Porvorim. The left-hander scored 120 runs and featured in a 221-run partnership for the sixth wicket with No. 3 Suyash Prabhudessai, who scored a double century. The match was drawn.

By reaching three figures, Arjun emulated his father, the great Sachin Tendulkar. Sachin scored an unbeaten 100 for Bombay against Gujarat in the first innings of a Ranji Trophy match at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. It was his first-class debut.

Arjun, unlike his father, is a bowling all-rounder. The 23-year-old left Mumbai and signed up to play for Goa earlier this year for more opportunities. He has played 16 limited-overs matches for Mumbai in his career.

India 'A' beats Bangladesh 'A'

Abhimanyu Easwaran and Saurabh Kumar were the chief architects of India 'A''s 1-0 series win over Bangladesh 'A' in Bangladesh. The two 'unofficial' Tests were held in Cox's Bazar and Sylhet.

Bangladesh 'A' managed to pull off a draw in the first match despite being bowled out for 112 in the first innings and eventually being behind in the first innings by 353 runs. India 'A' won the second 'Test' by an innings and 123 runs, Easwaran scoring a century and Saurabh and Mukesh Kumar picking up six wickets in the first and second innings, respectively.

Saurabh, the off-spinner, ended up with 15 wickets in the series.

Mignon du Preez announces retirement

South Africa batter Mignon du Preez has announced her retirement from international cricket.

"It's never an easy decision to step away from something you love as much as I love cricket. But I know in my heart that the time is right for me to announce my retirement from all forms of international cricket. However, I will still continue to play the shorter format of the game in the global leagues until such a time that I am blessed to become a mom and start a family of my own," she said in a statement.

Du Preez played one Test, 154 ODIs and 114 T20Is in a career spanning 15 years. She led her team in 46 ODIs.

Abhishek Mukherjee

AFP

'I'VE STOPPED CHASING THINGS'

Ishant Sharma says he is enjoying his cricket now and not worried about making a comeback in the IPL or in the Indian team. "As long as the body can be in space and as long as I feel passionate about going through the grind, I will keep going," says the fast bowler.

AMOL KARHADKAR

Ishant Sharma... "When I started bowling fast, I did so because I enjoyed it, not because someone wanted or someone disliked me." SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

After Delhi's sorry loss to Maharashtra in the opening game of the Ranji Trophy, most of Ishant Sharma's team-mates boarded a flight to Guwahati in the wee hours of Saturday (December 17) for the next game. Ishant, however, returned to Delhi a day earlier due to side strain: "a soft tissue damaged while stretching with the second new ball." Ishant, one of only two India fast bowlers to have played more than 100 Tests, opens up on his career and fast bowling.

Q. What would you tell a youngster who asks you the secret of playing 100 Tests as a pacer?

A. The only thing I would say right now is: "Do not think too much about the workload." That's a new term that's come up in recent times, especially for fast bowlers. I never saw anything like that during my international stint. When I started playing, my coach was an old-fashioned coach who would give me a ball in hand at 1 o'clock in the afternoon and we would go on till the sunset. That's how I could bowl long spells when I made my debut in Ranji Trophy and later on for India. If you want to improve, the only thing you can do is to keep bowling.

Do you feel that Indian pacers are at times unnecessarily overprotected or they avoid playing games unless it's absolutely necessary?

I think if you have earned your reputation through domestic cricket, you should not be selective about playing games thereafter. If you want to play domestic cricket, nobody can stop you. Only when you have played a lot of cricket for the country can you be given a break at times. Most pacers break down during Ranji Trophy games because they don't go through the ideal preparation. Bowling in Ranji Trophy is a different ballgame altogether.

If you are studying for the IAS exam, you have to study for 16 hours a day. Similarly, if you want to prepare to last a whole season of Ranji Trophy and bowl 20 overs a day, you cannot prepare for it by taking breaks. You have to prepare accordingly. Only if you are used to bowling 25 overs in the nets every day you can bowl 20 overs in a game.

Where do you see your cricket journey heading at this juncture?

I don't really think about future too much. I am just enjoying my cricket right now. That's why I have played all the three formats of this domestic season. I am not putting myself under pressure of 'I want to make a comeback' anywhere. I have left all these things out of my mind. As long as I am passionate about the game, I will keep enjoying cricket.

Does that mean you have achieved all that you wanted at the highest level?

Not really. It's not that I don't want to go back there and play but I have stopped chasing things. Wherever I am playing, I will give my 100 per cent but will not expect to be picked in the [national] team when I do well. Like I said, I have started enjoying myself on the field and helping out the youngsters whenever I can.

How different is remaining unsold in an IPL auction to being dropped from the Indian team?

To be honest, I have stopped thinking about all these things. Once I go back home, I have my family, they love me. I have my dogs, they don't really care what I do on a field.

I have my wife, my parents and my friends, they just see me as Ishant and not as a cricketer. I just enjoy my life. I don't care about whether I am wanted or unwanted anywhere. I am still playing this game because I love playing cricket. When I started bowling fast, I did so because I enjoyed it, not because someone wanted or someone disliked me. Honestly, I don't care about all these things and don't want to care about it either.

Have you given a thought to life after being a competitive cricketer?

I haven't started thinking about it yet because I worked really hard ahead of the domestic season to last the whole season. Yes, unfortunately, I've injured a soft tissue since I started playing days'cricket after almost a year. I hope I recover soon but my brain is still that of an 18-year-old. It wants to keep on playing but I have to listen to my body as well. But as long as the body can be in space and as long as I feel passionate about going through the grind, I will keep going.

The moment I don't feel like going through paces after getting up one morning, I will be done with it.

Impressive run: Shaji Ul Mulk (left) unveiling the trophy for the sixth season of Abu Dhabi T10. Viewership of the tournament increased from 37 million to 342 million between 2017 (the first season) and 2021.
ABU DHABI T10

T10: Cricket's answer to the Olympics?

The six-season-old Abu Dhabi T10, born on the sand beds of UAE's capital city, is waiting to occupy a larger space in cricket's burgeoning calendar. The format may confound the layman and offend the connoisseur, but as its owners have tactfully advertised, it may be ideal for the Olympic Games.

LALITH KALIDAS

The clock is ticking. It will soon be 4pm. Rauf, the Afghan cab driver, takes the wrong exit from the Abu Dhabi freeway and a bunch of scribes travelling to the Sheikh Zayed Stadium are slightly delayed.

The Abu Dhabi T10 League playoffs have begun. Morrisville Samp Army meets New York Strikers in Qualifier 1. The first five overs of the innings stood completed when Rauf's van crossed a deserted stretch on the way to the stadium. The seats weare gradually being occupied as the Strikers cruised to the final with a four-wicket win by 5.45pm. In another 15 minutes, Deccan Gladiators would take on Team Abu Dhabi at the same strip.

The decibel levels of the mainly Pakistani, Indian and Afghan crowd shot up in no time. Gladiators pipped Abu Dhabi and returned for another skirmish (Qualifier 2) at 8.30pm. Nicholas Pooran's men chose the hard way to the final; they would go on to defeat Strikers the next day to defend the title.

Time is of essence in this format. It is relentless; in today's faced-paced world, the six-season-old cub born on the sand beds of Abu Dhabi is waiting to occupy a larger space in cricket's burgeoning calendar. While the International Cricket Council (ICC) has reserved approval for T10 in Abu Dhabi, there is currently no room for the format in the Future Tours Programme.

Fans are on an overdose and players are spending more time in rehabs. T10 may confound the layman and the connoisseur, but as its owners have tactfully advertised, it can be the best bet for cricket's involvement in the Olympic Games.

The Olympics push

Cricket hasn't been part of the Olympics since the 1900 Games, when England beat France to win the gold medal. However, after

Champions: Deccan Gladiators won the title for the second time in two years, beating New York Strikers in the final.
ABU DHABI T10

the T20 World Cup this year, ICC chairman Greg Barclay expressed his desire to push for cricket's inclusion in the 2028 Games. Barclay, who chairs ICC's Olympic Working Group, said the movement will get stronger as the World Cup heads to the United States (co-host with the West Indies) in 2024. "T20 is our global growth vehicle," Barclay announced in a column for *insidethegames.biz*.

Are the ICC stakeholders missing something here? The voice of what's brewing on the field, perhaps?

Team Abu Dhabi coach Paul Farbrace believes T10, and not T20, should be preferred by cricket's stakeholders. "T10 is the best vehicle for the Olympics because it's a short, sharp game. If we take cricket to the Olympics, we should be careful not to put people off. We want a game that people would be enthused by and want to watch more of," says Farbrace, an architect of England's white-ball renaissance.

Farbrace believes the ICC will be hard-pressed to find equilibrium in the game with T10 also knocking on its door. "They are going to lose players down the franchise route. The game needs a good hard look at itself. Do we need T20Is or just the T20 World Cup? The franchise game is fantastic. There's a lot more work and opportunity. I am a huge fan of Test cricket, but we have to accept that if players have the option to go and earn excellent money, why wouldn't you? Same with the coaches, why wouldn't you?," Farbrace remarks.

Franchise cricket has expanded the opportunities for employment from the game. Team Abu Dhabi bowler and Australia leg-spin sensation Peter Hatzoglou says: "If not for T20s and T10 now, I would never have been a professional. Until April 2022, I was working for KPMG (a financial services firm) in Australia. I could not even get a State contract. These international tournaments have given someone like me year-round employment."

Abu Dhabi T10's stock has risen since the first season in 2017. The viewership has risen exponentially from 37 million to 342 million between 2017 and the previous season. The league received more than 1600 applications for the player draft this year - a significant number given the proliferation of T20 leagues and a crammed international calendar.

T10 founder Shaji Ul Mulk lays out the future path: "T10 is hoping to make its presence felt in at least five continents. While Asia and Africa are already locked in, we also want to bring the Americas and Europe under our umbrella."

T10 will also seep into Zimbabwe with help from the African Cricket Association (ACA) and expand to all 22 member nations. "It will only be good for cricket to be part of the Olympic family. The whole thing is time-bound. The ICC can't be there beyond a certain number of days. T10 is inevitably going to be the answer," ACA CEO Cassim Suliman says in Abu Dhabi.

It remains to be seen whether the ICC gravitates towards T10. Time is ticking.

The writer was in Abu Dhabi at the invitation of the Abu Dhabi T10 League

Long awaited: Jaipur Pink Panthers peaked at the right time to end up as champion. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Pink Panthers, top dog again

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Jaipur Pink Panthers started slowly but improved as the season progressed to end up as champion, grabbing hold of the trophy after eight years. Injuries hurt Puneri Paltan, which finished as the runner-up.

An old champion regained its crown, youngsters showed up the old guard, and action on the mat got faster – there was much to savour from the ninth season of the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL). Here is a recap of the highs and lows from the 72-day carnival.

Jaipur rocking again

Jaipur Pink Panthers won the title in the first season of the PKL but couldn't lay its hands on the trophy for the next seven. Coaches and star players came and went, but Jaipur's luck did not change. It seemed the team would underwhelm again: it suffered a string of defeats, looked patchy in defence, and relied far too much on one man – Arjun Deshwal.

While other teams scripted fairytale comeback, the Panthers quietly restructured their attack line, trying various combinations and strategies. Their defence improved and defenders started finding their rhythm towards the third leg of the group stage. The Panthers topped the league standings, thereby directly making it to the semifinals. Two clinical performances – against Bengaluru Bulls and Puneri Paltan – handed them the trophy once again.

"Before the season began, I asked the boys how many of them had a PKL title. Only Sunil Kumar (the captain) raised his hand. I then told the team that we will finish the league with everyone having that champion tag to their name, and we did it," an emotional Abhishek Bachchan, the Panthers team owner, said after the final.

Title, at long last, for Rahul Chaudhari

In an interview with *Sportstar* in 2019, Rahul Chaudhari had said he would get married only after winning the PKL title. He was with Tamil Thalaivas then, after a successful stint with Telugu Titans. His trajectory dipped from thereon, and with the trophy eluding him, he moved on in his personal life.

Cut to 2022, and many were surprised when the Panthers roped him in ahead of the ninth season. But coach Sanjeev Kumar Balliyan & Co. managed what the Thalaivas and the Paltan could not: by changing his playing role (he wasn't a pure raider any more, but an all-rounder), the Panthers obtained more than 70 vital points from him.

"Before the final, I told Rahul that this will be a game for you. [Right] from the first season, he has been putting in the efforts to make a name for himself, so this title is for him. Rahul is the most senior player in the team but Sunil is the captain. However, the way he listened to everyone, gelled with the boys, and contributed towards this team is incredible," Bachchan said about Rahul 'The Showman'.

Runner-up finish for Paltan

It was a case of so near yet so far for the Paltan. Thanks to their *Yuva Paltan* programme – scouts recruit young talent from in and around Maharashtra – the side has a strong bench strength. Those warming the bench stepped up at various points during the season to help the side seal important wins.

"I won't say anything to my team. It is because they stepped up at different stages that we even made it here. I am nothing but proud of them," skipper Fazel Atrachali said after the loss in the final. The Paltan had to rely on their youngsters after injuries to their two main raiders – Aslam Inamdar and Mohit Goyat.

Players warming the bench don't have the experience of the main players. While the side stuck with a largely stable playing combination, giving a player or two the opportunity to step in when needed, it was not nearly enough to make up for the loss of two important raiders.

Injuries: can teams do better?

PKL's ninth chapter was bookended by injuries. Pawan Sehrawat's knee injury during the first game he played changed the complexion of the tournament, while Inamdar and Goyat sat out for Pune in the final, hurting the team's chances.

Randhir, Pawan's former coach, believes that Pawan's failure to do his warm-ups properly might have contributed to his injury. The raider barely spent 10 minutes

The Showman: It was a season of redemption for Rahul Chaudhari. A change of role did the trick: he was no longer a pure raider with the Pink Panthers but an all-rounder. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

A hard blow: Thanks to his knee injury, Pawan Sehrawat barely spent 10 minutes on the mat in the PKL this season. He needed a surgery. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

on the mat this season, and needed surgeries on his knee.

"Pre-season testing is very important so we have baseline levels and physical state available for us to monitor," Paltan's physio Ankita Matondkar says.

"There are differences in body type and background preparation. Between states itself, we see differences in physicality for players. It's a long intense season too. So our research and development needs to be spot on and we need to listen to the players'

Next in line? Ashan Kumar is the hot favourite to land the role of head coach of the Indian men's kabaddi team. "Ahead of the season, I was asked to take over the reins of the Indian side. Should the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India still want me, I am here. Whatever I do, I always have an eye on what will work best for the national team," he said before the playoffs. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

bodies when taking any calls and readying them for matches," she adds.

All eyes on the coaching job

The postponement of the Asian Games in China means that this PKL season, like the one before it, was a virtual audition for the competition. It showed nations, especially India and Iran, what the talent pool looks like.

India is yet to announce the head coach of the men's side. Ashan Kumar, who effected a turnaround with the Thalaivas, carrying them to their maiden PKL playoffs, seems to be the hot favourite.

"Ahead of the season, I was asked to take over the reins of the Indian side. Should the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India still want me, I am here. Whatever I do, I always have an eye on what will work best for the national team," he said before the playoffs.

That doesn't stop others from harbouring ambitions. Bengaluru Bulls coach Randhir Sehrawat believes he can just as ably help India to the podium at the Asiad next year, too. "If given the opportunity, I can rally a team and take the side to the final," he said.

Who ends up with the gig is for all to wait and see.

Stalwart: Fazel Atrachali is PKL's most successful defender, and its most successful captain. He has two Pro Kabaddi titles under his belt – one with U Mumba, the other with Patna Pirates. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

'Besides PKL, we have nothing to support kabaddi'

Fascination for daring and adventure led Fazel Atrachali to kabaddi. The Iranian has excelled in the sport, winning medals for his country and carving out a great legacy in the Pro Kabaddi League. He feels he could have achieved much more in his career had it not been for lack of opportunities.

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Can you imagine kabaddi without Fazel Atrachali? The imperious Iranian might not have set foot on a kabaddi mat had his earlier plans worked out.

"I wanted to be a fireman," says the Puneri Paltan skipper.

What about the risks involved in the job? "I wanted the job because of the risk! What kind of life is it to just wake up, exercise, eat food and then sleep? What kind of life is that? We have to make something of ourselves, right?"

That itch for a life of daring and adventure saw him explore the sport of kabaddi. He helped his country win three Asian Games medals (two silvers and a gold) and a 2016 World Cup medal (silver). He also found a place in the hearts of fans in India: the 'Sultan' has terrorised raiders in the Pro Kabaddi League ever since he started his journey in the league, in 2015. And he has carved out a legacy already, winning two Pro Kabaddi titles – one with U Mumba, and the second with Patna Pirates.

Anger and disappointment

This season, Fazel has led an impressive campaign for the Paltan, helping the team finish as runner-up. Had Paltan won, Fazel would have pocketed his first PKL title as captain. His achievements in the league notwithstanding, the defender feels he could have achieved much more in his career.

"I am very upset because this was my time. After the 2018 Asian Games, we didn't have any tournament. 2019 to 2023, in this time, my life itself is finished (sic)," Fazel tells *Sportstar*.

"I was captain of Iran. From these five years, I should have had at least two or three medals and this makes me very angry. The fact that we didn't have any tournament really upsets me. We practised a lot for the Asian Games. We had a camp for months and then it ended up being postponed. This doesn't just affect us but even people like Pawan Sehrawat. For the last three years, he is the best raider from India, but he does not have World Cup or Asian Games medals to show for it. Thank God Pro Kabaddi is still on because the sport remains in people's mind. After the PKL, though, we don't have anything to support kabaddi," he says.

"After a few years, I might have to stop playing kabaddi. I feel like I've missed out on so much, on so many medals. We are stars here in PKL but that's a different thing. Take B. C. Ramesh (Paltan's head coach) for example. People say B. C. Ramesh is a two-time Asian Games gold medallist. That becomes your identity in this sport. In the last two-three years, if we had tournaments, we would have had more countries from Europe or more from Asia join kabaddi. Poland had kabaddi before, Pakistan and [South] Korea also — what's the motivation to keep going?," he asks.

Fazel passed by a number of milestones in PKL 9: he breached the 400 barrier (in tackle points) to become the league's most successful defender, and became the most successful captain in the league with 58 wins, leaving Paltan coach Anup Kumar behind. However, the highlight this season was his excellence as a tactician. He not only thinks about his own game but also plans for all seven players on the mat. It's a role that often made him less pernicious as a defender. It's a worthy sacrifice.

"We're constantly looking at strategies, analysing our own strengths, working out areas to strike the opponent. If I was not captain, I would give a high five in every game. But I have to stay on the mat and control my boys and the play," he explains.

Fazel the coach?

Is all this preparing Fazel for a career as a coach? For he has been mentoring individual players, too. Heidarali Ekrami, who made his PKL debut with U Mumba, has been a beneficiary.

In 12 games, Ekrami has 32 raid points and two tackle points to his name. He has shown prowess as a raider, a healthy sign for the Iranian national team as it moves closer to the Asian Games.

"Heidarali is from my village. We practise with each other and I am happy that someone I helped is here and doing well."

Iran has consistently produced good defenders who have excelled in the PKL. Patna Pirates' Mohammadreza Chiyaneh Shadloui is the latest in the list, finishing in the top two among defenders (as per defenders' tally) in both the seasons he has played in. But how does Iran strengthen its raiding?

"Iranian raiders are also good, it's just that the Indian raiders are better. They shine better, every match they have super 10s. So Iranians can't shine so much. The lack of tournaments also is one factor. Kabaddi has gone down and affected the kind of new players who come through the ranks. There are no competitions or money," he signs off ruefully.

Fan favourite: Atrachali is popular among kabaddi fans in India. He has been terrorising raiders ever since he started his journey in the PKL, and he is nowadays also making his mark as a tactician. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Scan the code to watch the video

Meet the Raos – Indian kabaddi's pioneering couple

Ejjapureddi Prasad Rao's significant contributions to kabaddi for over three decades – including the authorship of two books – have been made possible by his better half, wife Mythreyee. From knowing nothing about the sport to helming the technical control room at the Pro Kabaddi League and the Asian Games, it's been quite a journey for the couple.

LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

For the love of the game: "I don't think anything else matters to him. He eats, sleeps, and drinks kabaddi." – Mythreyee Rao (left) speaking about her husband. LAVANYA LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Ejjapureddi Prasad Rao is well-known in kabaddi circles. The coach-turned-technical expert has played a significant role in grooming veteran coaches in the Indian ecosystem and in popularising kabaddi in countries new to the sport. What many don't know is that his contributions are made possible by his better half, wife Mythreyee.

From knowing nothing about the sport to helming the technical control room at the Pro Kabaddi League and the Asian Games, it's been quite a journey for the couple.

"I didn't know anything about this game. I studied in a convent [school] — Stella Maris in Bengaluru. We had kho kho and basketball. I was interested in literature and books. I got introduced to the game after I married him in 1985 and since then, I was hooked," Mythreyee tells *Sportstar*.

Incidentally, it was a woman who drew her to the game, a player she likens to today's star raider Pardeep Narwal. "He (Kabaddi Rao, as he's fondly called in the circuit) took me to a Nationals game, and there I saw Monika Nath, an Arjuna Awardee in kabaddi. Her leaps left me spellbound. It opened me up to the possibility that this is possible for women also to do and it only made me more interested in the sport," she explains.

Literary beginnings

Back then, Mythreyee was in the administrative setup of the Sports Authority of India and handled athlete schemes. This meant she could not travel with her globe-trotting husband as he spread the gospel of kabaddi. But Rao sought her services when he wanted to put in place some literature on the nuances of the sport.

"We used to fight because some of the words I would use in kabaddi would not have the right meaning. For example, cant. The actual word is chant, but the kabaddi world uses cant. So we sat together and formalised a lot of rules and terminologies of the game," Rao explains.

"I would often demonstrate a roll or a particular tactic. She would take notes. We would then cross-check if the description matched the technique and then archive it."

This collaboration began in 1989, and it took the Raos a year to see it through — they did it over the weekends when their daily jobs allowed them the time to focus on this side project. Computers were not part of their lives then. "While the world ended up with his first book — *Modern Coaching in Kabaddi* — I ended up with a writer's cramp and a tennis elbow," Mythreyee says.

"We sat and wrote pages and pages of manuscript. If there was an error in the page, the entire thing had to be rewritten."

The experience was different when the couple invested in a computer for Rao's second book — *The Complete Handbook on Kabaddi*. "I had gone abroad, and when I returned, I found her in tears. She had meticulously done all the work for the second book on the computer but it had crashed, and we lost a year's worth of work. It all needed to be redone. We just sat with each other and cried for about half an hour. Eventually, we got at it again, but this time with floppy disks," Rao says.

Architect of scoring

Mythreyee became more and more involved in kabaddi. A turning point was in 2006 after a trip to Doha for the Asian Games where she was trained as a result manager. "All along, my work was to just help him in the sport but Doha is where my understanding of the sport evolved and I realised I could do more. I also did not have much of a choice because kabaddi is his first wife, I can't compete with her," she says with a chuckle.

To find her niche, she stepped into match preparation — assigning officials, procuring the start lists, drawing out scoresheets, overseeing the tabulation of scores, and bringing out the result. The forms one sees in the Pro Kabaddi League — a scoresheet and its elements, how different technical officials have different scoring forms, a third raid diary — were all formulated by Mythreyee. "I brought about a system where we have tiers of documentation from one game. We have electronic systems and manual systems as well so our decision-making is foolproof. This is important because it's a very fast game and we need checks at every level to eliminate errors as much as possible. It also allows umpires to make good decisions. Systems could miss out on human elements like time wasting, and tussles. This scoresheet/criteria check helps in such situations," she says.

But do husband and wife fight over what they see on the mat?

"Of course. Our conversations during the drive back home focus on this. He is right about contentious reviews or decisions. Mine is more of a spectator view," she explains.

The road ahead

As another edition of the Pro Kabaddi comes to a close, the questions on everyone's lips is: can the league be expanded to include women, too? Maybe other Mythreyees could find other Monikas and enter the sport. "We've been discussing this, and one of the things coming up is a suggestion to make the playing area a little smaller. The court we have now is a bit big for women," she explains.

"The point is to make the game more interesting, to ensure more tackles can happen. Think about that super tackle by Mohammad Nabibakhsh earlier in the season, we want more of that and for the crowd to be on their feet," Rao adds.

That effort will wait for a bit as the couple finally gets some time off after a relentless two-and-a-half-month-long season. While Mythreyee will head back to old comforts — books and music — Rao will continue to unwind on kabaddi. "He relaxes also with kabaddi, I don't think anything else matters to him. He eats, sleeps, and drinks kabaddi," she concludes.

Finishing on top: Joshna Chinappa and Abhay Singh with their trophies. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Joshna goes on and on

K. KEERTHIVASAN

Joshna Chinappa outplayed teenager Anahat Singh to clinch her 19th Senior National title.

For the 36-year-old Joshna Chinappa, the Indian Squash Academy courts in Chennai is where it all started. As a 14-year-old playing in her first National final against Vaidehi Reddy in 2000, Joshna had given ample glimpse of her growing potential. She defeated the senior player in four games.

Twenty-two years have passed, and Joshna still remains the best at the domestic level. From 2000 to 2022, Joshna has failed to win the title only three times. In 2002, she lost to Mekala Subedar in the summit clash, while in 2011, she didn't take part. In 2016, she lost to Dipika Pallikal in the final.

Joshna's domination continued in the HCL-78th Senior Nationals at the Indian Squash and Triathlon Academy in Chennai as she outplayed 14-year-old Anahat Singh. Anahat, playing in her maiden National final, fought hard though.

Joshna had withdrawn from the PSA World Championships in May due to illness and suffered a minor knee injury at the end of August this year which forced her to skip a few PSA tournaments, including the Grasshopper Cup. And she was not sure of participating in the 2022-23 Senior Nationals.

Speaking to *Sportstar* after her record 19th title, Joshna, a former World No. 10 said: "It feels great to win 19 titles. For four months, I was out of it after the knee problem. I was not sure of taking part in the Senior Nationals and decided to compete only a few days before the event. This will be a good preparation for future events."

Joshna, ranked 30, is keen to improve her ranking before the Asian Games (AG) in September 2023. "I plan to play in PSA tournaments from January 2023 and get my rankings up for the AG," Joshna said.

Joshna is two short of the world record 21 titles held by Luxembourg's Sandra Denis. But she dismisses any such talk. "No world record. Thank you," she smiles.

A winner of 11 PSA titles, Joshna doesn't want to look far and insisted that she would like to take it year by year. She credits her recovery from the knee injury to her physio Yash Pande. "I didn't train much after I injured my knee prior to the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games. Thanks to Yash's help I was able to do well." Joshna, seeded No. 1 didn't show any signs of rustiness in the four rounds of the Nationals. She moved well with good shot selection and did not lose a game in any of the matches. Against Akansha Salunkhe, Joshna proved to be superior in all departments of the game.

However, her toughest opponent was the 14-year-old 'pocket dynamite' Anahat Singh, the No. 2 seed. In the final, Anahat gave a tough fight to Joshna. The reigning Asian U-15 champion, pushed the former World No. 10 with her excellent retrieves and deft placements. Using her vast experience, Joshna neutralised all of Anahat's best shots.

Joshna was all praise for Anahat. "She handled the pressure really well and played a fearless game."

No doubt, Anahat is here to stay.

Abhay bags men's title

Abhay Singh is a powerful shot-maker and he showed his attacking game in defeating an equally good S. Velavan in four games in the men's final.

The talented 24-year-old has been a trainee of Indian Squash Academy for the last decade or so.

As a teenager, he was seen as one of the brightest talents, but Abhay was not able to provide any breakthrough performance either in PSA or at the domestic level for seniors.

Abhay had won four PSA titles in the run-up to the Nationals — the Tuanku Muhriz Trophy in Malaysia, NSW Open in Sydney and two SRFI Indian Tour titles in September-November in Chennai and Jodhpur respectively.

The top seeded Abhay was hardly troubled by his opponents. He shrugged off the challenge from old warhorse Sandeep Jangra in the semifinals, before defeating Velavan in the final.

Ranked 74 (he was ranked a career best 72 a week after winning the Jodhpur PSA), Abhay is eager to break into the top 50 soon. "It's been a childhood dream for me to win the Senior Nationals. I would rate it much higher than the PSA titles I have won. It was a dream, my biggest win and a very, very special moment for me," Abhay told *Sportstar*. Admitting he was nervous before the Nationals, Abhay said, "We (Velavan and I) were playing in our first Nationals final, and we knew each other's game. We were doubles partners in the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games. My strategy was to take the pace off his game," he said.

Talented: Anahat Singh (in front), in action against Tanvi Khanna during the women's quarterfinals. Joshna was all praise for Anahat after the final. "She handled the pressure really well and played a fearless game," Joshna said.

M. VEDHAN

The results (finals)

Men: Abhay Singh (TN) bt S. Velavan (TN) 11-13,11-7, 11-6,11-4;

Women: Joshna Chinappa (TN) bt Anahat Singh (Del) 11-8, 11-9, 11-9.

The call of the wild

Adventure is no longer a reality of life for the people of Dambuk in Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Dibang Valley; it has turned into a festivity. Men and their machines were pitted against the force of nature in one of India's foremost off-roading events held here in December – the JK Tyre Orange 4x4 Fury.

DHRUVA PRASAD

Once known as *Kaalapani* because it was isolated from the rest of the country, Dambuk in Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Dibang Valley district has undergone a complete transformation. So much so that adventure is no longer a reality of life for the people there; it has turned into a festivity.

In December, the tehsil hosted the eighth edition of the JK Tyre Orange 4x4 Fury — one of India's foremost off-roading events.

The off-roading spectacle — the flagship event of the Orange Festival of Adventure and Music — saw 20 competitors participating in three stages held over two days (December 16 and 17) as men and their machines were pitted against the force of nature. This was a conflict the village had seen before, about eight years ago, albeit in more dire circumstances.

"When we started in 2014, we did the recce on elephants. The entire area — Dambuk circle of Lower Dibang Valley District of Arunachal Pradesh — used to be known as *Kaalapani*. Seven months every year it used to be cut off from the rest of the world due to floods. People used to live a tough life. It was a real eye-opener for us at the Motorsports Club of Arunachal. We were invited to see the area by the director of the festival. They wanted us to conduct off-roading here because this is the paradise of off-roading. We don't need to go about making the circuit because the whole topography is off-roading paradise. You have the rivers, boulders, water-crossings, mountains, and jungles. We don't need to go scouting for routes. We just come one week before, do a proper recce, do waypoints and then come three days before the event again to finalise and cross-check everything," Lhakpa Tsering, president of Motorsports Club of Arunachal, told *Sportstar*.

Let the race begin: The eighth season of the JK Tyre Orange 4x4 Fury formally begins at Dambuk. Bridges opened up and national highways were connected to Dambuk in 2019, and since then, the village has grown and developed considerably.
DHRUVA PRASAD

The first stage of the off-roading competition was held over a five-kilometre long circuit on the eastern dry riverbed of the Dibang river. Drivers negotiated a treacherous mix of gravel, boulders, loose sand, and elephant grass. That same day, the second stage was conducted over a six-kilometre course on the western flank of the Dibang; it involved crossing a shallow stream and plying on dirt tracks in forests, besides braving the inescapable and ubiquitous riverbed gravel.

Test of perseverance and skill

Capping off and highlighting the event was the 22-kilometre course on the second day held on the riverbed of the Sisseri river, a tributary of the majestic Brahmaputra. Competitors were faced with similar obstacles in the form of rocks, boulders and sand in an ultimate test of perseverance and skill. Drivers were slapped with penalty points for arriving late at pre-designated checkpoints and the winner was adjudged on the basis of the least penalty points accumulated over the three stages.

With 136 penalty points awarded, Marnya Chiram and navigator Mari Basar emerged victorious in the under 2000cc category in their Maruti Gypsy. Devjyoti Borah and Sandeep Gogoi were the winners in the above 2000 cc category with 210 penalty points in their Force Gurkha.

"In the first two stages, the waypoints were hidden. In the third stage, we could see them but there were so many obstacles that it took a long time to reach them," 53-year-old Chiram, a Superintendent Engineer in the Public Works Department who hails from Lepa Rada district, said.

"We are given a pinpoint. It's totally controlled by GPS (Global Positioning System). We have to download an app. It's a paid app called *GPX Viewer*. The *Android* phone locates the pinpoint but we have to figure out our own route. However, driving skill is a must regardless of how good the navigator is," Basar, president of the Lower Siang district cycling association said, explaining his role.

Hailing *JK Tyre*'s role in sponsoring participants competing in an expensive sport, Chiram also acknowledged the role the Orange Festival played in creating awareness about tourism promotion among the locals. "The youth here was aimless. They didn't have a destination. Now, because of road connectivity and the Orange Festival, the brain has changed. They are getting into business and moving towards being self-sufficient," he said.

Taste of modernity

The quaint village of Dambuk, caught in the wave of infrastructure development, has its fair share of anachronisms. Now, sports cars are plying on its roads and resorts are springing up in little pockets of the area. In September 2021, Chief Minister Pema Khandu tweeted a video of a host of supercars that would drive 1000 kilometres across eastern Arunachal Pradesh, bearing testi-

A taste of the Northeast: A bead seller at the JK Tyre Orange 4x4 Fury. For a few days every year, Dambuk is transformed into a sustainable variant of Dubai.
DHRUVA PRASAD

Rugged terrain: Chiram (left) and Basar, the two Arunachali men involved in arrangements for the motorsport festival who spoke to *Sportstar*. Chiram says the festival has benefitted the people of Dambuk as it has giving them revenue from tourism.
DHRUVA PRASAD

mony to the improving quality of roads in the State.

Speaking from the sight of luxurious Swiss tents arranged for the media and organisers along the pristine waters of the Dibang river, Tsering reminisced of a time when the hospitable and proud residents of Dambuk village had qualms about taking money from the participants of the Orange Festival who were going to be put up in their homes because "how can we take money from our guests?"

"The festival has been a good exposure for the people of Dambuk. The roads have been developed. Since 2019, when the bridges opened up and the national highways connected this place, it has grown to a huge extent. At that point of time, there was not a single room except for the government dak bungalow — here we call it the inspection bungalow. Now, there are more than 500 beds in and around this area. If you include the areas that are an hour's drive away from here, then you have more than 1000 beds. However, the event is so popular that we are still facing a shortage," Tsering quipped.

Against the backdrop of the Orange Festival, where American hip-hop bands like Big Mountain and Flipsyde enthrall crowds, a beading expert from Longding, which shares its boundary with Myanmar, sells her wares and an off-roading enthusiast gorges on coffee in one of the numerous food stalls. The anachronisms dissipate into the misty evening air. Revellers, perhaps fleetingly, are transported to a more sustainable variant of Dubai, where the festival's famed and eponymous oranges are headed.

The writer was in Dambuk at the invitation of the organisers

Scorching the tracks: Race cars zoom through during the season finale of the Indian Racing League in Hyderabad. The league was a kind of test run to check the preparedness of the 2.8km circuit before the marquee event. G. RAMAKRISHNA

MIDTOWN MADNESS

The Hyderabad race circuit, which nestles along the picturesque Necklace Road on the banks of the Hussain Sagar lake, is all set for its Formula E debut. The buzz in the city – people from all races and cultures turned up in droves for the Indian Racing League – augurs well for the 2023 E-prix.

V. S. ARAVIND

A racer guns his engine, and the sudden roar of the mean machine reverberates around the adjacent parkland. "It's here," shrieks a young spectator, waving his hand, signalling to his friends to witness a marvel of technology. In the blink of an eye, a car races past at approximately 200kmph; the driver is battling G-forces, manoeuvring tight corners before pressing the throttle down the straight. It's a sight to behold for racing lovers.

The smell of rubber scorching the track replaces the aroma of *biryani*, *haleem* and *kebabs* as a string of makeshift eateries in front of the iconic Prasad cinemas, shouldering each other with charcoal ovens and the famous Irani *chai* with *Osmania* biscuits, made way for a pitlane. It's turned into a cars' village and the pit crew is involved in intense activity: they are wheeling in the speed demons and lending an ear to check the pulse of the engine. The hydraulic cables lie around, the torque gun nut-runner is constantly at work fixing wheels. Bolts are caroming on the ground. It's race time.

The Hyderabad race circuit nestles along the picturesque Necklace Road on the banks of the Hussain Sagar lake, with the iconic statue of Gautam Buddha as the backdrop. It's light winter noon, the sun is out, and with a buzz of excitement in the air, the city hosts a successful Indian Racing League (IRL) with Godspeed Kochi winning the in-

Addicted to speed: Racing enthusiasts arrive at the Hyderabad street circuit to witness the Indian Racing League. The race offered them an escape from a humdrum weekend life. G. RAMAKRISHNA

augural championship. People from all races and cultures turn up in droves for the first weekend races; it is trending with young fans dressed up in casuals, donning hoodies and caps, clicking selfies.

Six city-based teams — Hyderabad Blackbirds, Speed Demons Delhi, Bangalore Speedsters, Chennai Turbo Riders, God-Speed Kochi and Goa Aces — consisting of Indian and foreign drivers participate in the event. A mandatory female driver racing in the single-seater cockpit representing each team is the biggest attraction. For the fans that pack into the racing circuit to watch fast cars in action, the spectacle offers an escape from a humdrum weekend life.

Street circuit

The race track consists of 17 turns surrounds the NTR Gardens. It passes by *Prasads* Multiplex and then the Indira Gandhi statue roundabout before running alongside the Hussain Sagar lake. Racers then have to negotiate a hairpin turn near the new Martyrs Memorial before slamming the brakes to navigate through the trickiest last turn. They hit the gas again to accelerate down the straight towards the chequered flag.

Cracking a market where the sport had long struggled to make its presence felt, Hyderabad entered record books when it was chosen to host Formula E next February. Season nine of the Formula E World Championship will see 11 teams and 22 drivers racing the new Gen3 cars that are designed and optimised specifically for street racing. The city will host Round 4 of the total 17 races in Formula E. And the just-concluded racing league was a kind of test run to check the preparedness of the 2.8km circuit before the marquee event.

Manoj Dalal, a senior official of the Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India (FMSCI), said that the city's street circuit is equipped to host the Formula E race and that an International Automobile Federation (FIA) official was pleased with the track's preparedness.

Manoj was the race director of the Chennai leg of the IRL and was present in the city on deputation by FMSCI in a different capacity during the season finale. Speaking exclusively to *Sportstar*, the veteran race director said: "An FIA inspector was present to inspect the track and he was happy with the circuit. The official suggested some very small changes which we will carry out in the coming days. The official was very happy with the facilities in and around the circuit and the track infrastructure, and will now submit his report to the FIA. We are hopeful of getting a Grade-2 certificate and are waiting for the green signal."

The FMSCI senior official welcomed motorsport's growth in the city, saying that hosting a successful Formula E will place India on the world racing map. "It's a matter of great prestige, and FMSCI will take the right steps to ensure Hyderabad hosts a successful Formula E," he said.

The FIA has laid stringent guidelines, with the safety of cars and drivers being a top priority. The track's readiness was tested in real time during the twin rounds of IRL races.

"All the safety parameters were in place at the circuit and it's a fabulous race track for the drivers. Today's race was planned well and there were eight fully equipped ambulances ready in case of a medical emergency, and the firefighting equipment is brilliant. Overall, we have the infrastructure and everything that is required to host an international race. We are well-equipped to host Formula-E in February," the FMSCI official said.

'Ticking every box'

Akhil Rabindra, the only Indian and the first Asian to be selected by the Aston Martin Racing Driver Academy, is currently one of the hottest Indian prospects in the racing circuit. Representing Hyderabad in the IRL, Akhil won the drivers' championship title. He capped off a brilliant season with 143 points. And the young racer, who has driven on tracks around the world, is impressed with the circuit. "It's an amazing track and it feels so good to race in Hyderabad. It's a very good opportunity for drivers in India and today is the best opportunity to start racing as there are better facilities. All and all, it is ticking every box," Akhil told *Sportstar*.

Akhil, India's only GT4 racer, is thrilled at the prospect of Hyderabad hosting the Formula E-Prix.

"I am very excited and Formula E is great and that's the future. Formula E keeps the enthusiasm alive and they are fast cars and it's awesome that it is coming to Hyderabad. We haven't had any international racing in India for a long time and with Formula E being such a big brand, it goes all around the world and it's going to be a big push for India," the 26-year-old said.

The countdown has begun. Racing fans from across the globe will descend to witness the 2023 Hyderabad E-Prix. The circuit garage that has now been razed down to the ground will be built once again, this time with much fervour and meticulous attention to detail. After all, the new year will see India leaving a footprint in the history of Formula-E motor racing.

Adrenaline rush: The Hyderabad street circuit passes by the iconic Prasads cinemas en route to Necklace Road (now P. V. Narasimha Rao marg) that surrounds the Hussain Sagar lake. Makeshift eateries in front of the cinemas had to make way for a pitlane. The track consists of 17 turns around the NTR gardens. NAGARA GOPAL

Barsoton, Jisa rewrite course records

Defending champion Leonard Barsoton and previous edition's silver medallist Desi Jisa rewrote course records in perfect conditions to win gold medals in elite international men and women categories in the seventh Tata Steel Kolkata 25K race in Kolkata.

Kenyan Barsoton retained his title by clocking one hour, 12 minutes and 49 seconds. His previous course record of 1:13.05 was set in 2019, when the event was last held prior to the pandemic.

Barsoton remained in the leading group before increasing his pace after 20km. He maintained a good gap between him and the rest of his competitors until the end.

"I knew exactly when to pick up pace. The last stretch is flat," said Barsoton, who made light of some niggles to bag the winner's purse of $7500 and a course record bonus of $3000.

Double Delhi half-marathon winner Birhanu Legese (1:12:54) and Commonwealth Games marathon champion Victor Kiplangat (1:12:56) also bettered the course record at second and third places.

Bahrain's Jisa timed 1:21:04 for the women's crown. She eclipsed the two-year-old mark of 1:22:09.

Zeineba Yimer (1:21:18), Mercyline Chelangat (1:21:31) and Obse Abdeta (1:21:43) placed second, third and fourth respectively while going below the previous course record.

Abhishek Pal (1:17:52) and Sanjivani Jadhav (1:34:23) were the best finishers among Indian men and women runners.

The results: International men: 1. Leonard Barsoton (Ken) 1:12:49; 2. Birhanu Legese (Eth) 1:12:54; 3. Victor Kiplangat (Uga) 1:12:56. **International women:** 1. Desi Jisa (Bah) 1:21:04; 2. Zeineba Yimer (Eth) 1:21:18; 3. Mercyline Chelangat (Uga) 1:21:31. **Indian men:** 1. Abhishek Pal 1:17:52; 2. Kalidas Hirave 1:17:57; 3. Srinu Bugatha 1:18:25. **Indian women:** 1. Sanjivani Jadhav 1:34:23; 2. Monika Choudhary 1:37:00; 3. Reenu Singh 1:39:11.

Y. B. Sarangi

Indian women win FIH Nations Cup, promoted to 2023-24 Pro League

The Indian women's hockey team beat Spain 1-0 to win the inaugural FIH Nations Cup in Valencia. The result also means that Janneke Schopman-coached side has been promoted to the FIH Pro League 2023-24. Hockey India has announced cash prize of Rs. 2 lakh for every member of the squad and Rs. 1 lakh each for all the support staff.

The Indian team, which won the bronze medal at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham earlier this year, took an early lead in the summit clash against the Spanish team when Gurjit Kaur **(in pic)** found the bottom-right corner with her powerful drag flick following a penalty corner in the fifth minute.

The host nation tried hard and seemed to have broken the Indian defence, led by captain and goalkeeper Savita Punia, to find the equaliser in the 41st minute. However, the goal was disallowed. The Indian team was briefly reduced to 10 players as Udita, goalscorer in the semifinal against Ireland, was issued a green card (two-minute suspension) for a foul in the 45th minute but the Spanish team could not make use of the advantage. In the last meeting between the two finalists, Spain had beaten the Women in Blue by the same scoreline at the FIH Women's World Cup in July earlier this year.

India ended the tournament with a perfect record of five wins in five matches. Indian team beat Chile (3-1), Japan (2-1), and South Africa (2-0) in the group stage before a thrilling 2-1 win over Ireland in the penalty shootout in the semifinals.

India and Spain had played in the FIH women's Hockey Pro League 2021-22 season as replacement teams after pull-outs by Australia and New Zealand due to COVID-19 related issues.

India had finished a creditable third in the 2021-22 FIH Pro League. The country did not qualify for the ongoing 2022-23 Pro League season.

Team Sportstar

Manu Gandas wins inaugural SSP Chawrasia Invitational

Manu Gandas of Gurugram came up with another display of his dominant form in the season as he picked up a record sixth win by topping the inaugural S.S.P. Chawrasia Invitational, at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club. Manu Gandas posted a solid four-under 68 in the concluding round that saw him finish with a total of 13-under 275 (69-66-72-68) to ensure his seventh career win.

With his outstanding performance, Gandas saw off the challenge of Indian golfing giants and his playing partners such as Anirban Lahiri and Gaganjeet Bhullar, who finished second and third respectively. The triumph at the season's penultimate event also earned Gandas the winning cheque of Rs. 15,00,000 and helped him climb to the top spot in the PGTI rankings with a significant lead.

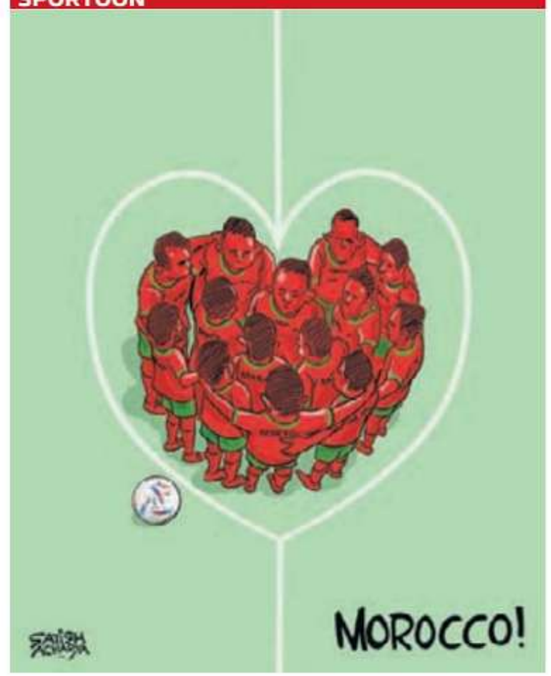
One of the top golfers with international fame, Anirban Lahiri scored a moderate two-under 70 in the final round to lose the top spot that he shared overnight with Gandas. Lahiri took the runner-up spot at 11-under 277 (71-65-71-70) while Gaganjeet Bhullar (69-72-67-71) produced a final round of 71 to claim third place at nine-under 279. Chandigarh's Yuvraj Singh Sandhu secured tied 25th place at four-over 292 and as a result slipped from first to second position in the PGTI rankings.

Yuvraj's season earnings stand at Rs. 68,47,768 as he now trails Gandas by a margin of over Rs. 12 lakh. The tournament host S.S.P. Chawrasia finished tied 21st at three-over 291. He was the highest-placed among the Kolkata-based professionals.

Manu Gandas began with a couple of good up and down birdies on the first and fourth as Anirban Lahiri kept pace with him by also sinking birdies on both those holes. Manu then began to pull away with two more birdies on the fifth and ninth where he drained putts from a range of seven to 12 feet. After both the top contenders made birdies on the 12th, the turning point came on the 13th where Anirban dropped a double-bogey, missing the green and his chip-putt, while Gandas made a brilliant par-save with an incredible chip that led to a tap-in. Gandas moved into a comfortable five-shot lead with a birdie on the 15th and closed the day with bogeys on the 17th and 18th. He managed to beat Lahiri, who had a birdie on the 17th, by two shots.

Amitabha Das Sharma

SPORTOON



From left: Uttam Singh Mundy, CEO, PGTI, SSP Chawrasia, Indian golf legend and tournament host, Rohan Ghosh, captain, RCGC; Manu Gandas, the winner of the SSP Chawrasia Invitational 2022 and Srinivasan H R, Director, TAKE Sports. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

11th WCCT 2020-2022

WCCT Results-Three-movers

By C.G.S.Narayanan

While the orginality and over all quality of the two-move section with its insipid theme was far below expectations, the three-move(B) section in 11h WCCT 2020-2022 produced many brilliancies.The two Indian entries presented below show Visserman changes.

C.G.S.Narayanan (India)
15-17th pl,11th WCCT B sec.2020-22

Mate in three moves

Key 1.Qb6! [2.Qb4+ Nd4/Bd4/Rd4 3.Bh7/Nf6/Bd5‡] 1...R×a4 2.R×a4+ Nd4/Bd4/Rd4 3.Qg6/Qe6/Q×b7‡ 1...Nd4 2.Bh7+ Nf5 3.B×f5‡ 1...Bd4 2.Qe6+ Be5 3.Q×e5‡ (3.R×e5?, 3.Nf6?) 1...Rd4 2.Q×b7+ Rd5 3.Q×d5‡ (3.B×d5?) 1...Bf3+ 2.e×f3+ Kd3 3.Bc4‡ Three Visserman changes after the self-pins on d4 in the sub-variations after the threat and after the black defence 1...Rxa4. When played as B1 1...Bd4/Rd4/Sd4 are followed by three entirely new mates. Babushka theme.

Reciprocal changes of mates (Visserman) after K-flights. The clean variations when the bK moves already in B1, giving more use to Rb3 and Sd7, is a plus. Nicely open construction; only Nh1 is somewhat underused (Comments by Sweden)

C.G.S. Narayanan (India)
23rd place,11 WCCT B sec.2020-2022

Mate in three moves

Key 1.e3! [2.Qc4+ Kf3 3.Se5‡] 1...B×e6 2.S×g3+ Kd5/Kf3 3.Bg2 (A)/Qg2(B) 1...Bc7 2.Rb4+ Kd5/Kf3 3.Qg2(B)/Bg2(A) 1...Kd5 2.Qd3+ Kc6 3.Qd6‡ 1...Kf3 2.Sf6 [3.Bg2‡]

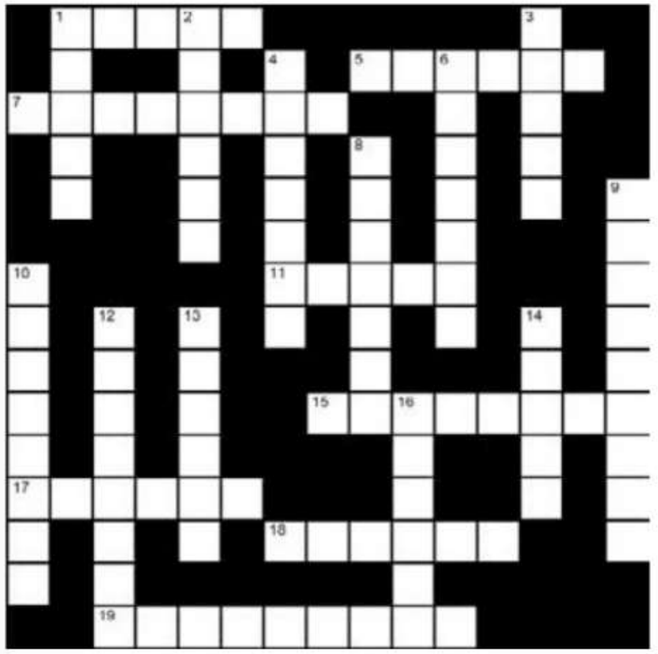
The wonderful masterpiece below was a clear winner.(Solutions with comments in the next issue)

Peter Gvozdják & Štefan Sovík(Slovakia),First place
11 WCCT Bsec 2020-2022

Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article'India finishes eleventh':
1.N×g5? [2.Qf3] 1...Ne4/Be4 2.Ng4/Nf1 but 1...Be2! 1.Nd6? 1...Ne4/Be4 2.Nf5/Nc4 but 1...g4! 1.N×c5? 1...Ne4/Be4 2.R×d3/Bd4 but 1...Qa8!
Key 1.Nc3! [2.Qf3] 1...Ne4/Be4 2.Nd5/Re2 1...Qa8 2.Q×c5 1...g4 2.Qh6

Readers may send in their queries to cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com



SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 A royal ..., usually the best possible hand in poker. (5)

5 Aditya ..., India's 77th GM. (6)

7 First batsman to score a triple hundred in a day-night Test. (5,3)

11 The Japanese boxer who became the first undisputed world bantamweight champion in 50 years. (5)

15 The County Ground, Taunton, is the home of ... County Cricket Club. (8)

17 Brittney ..., basketballer who was released from a Russian jail recently. (6)

18 If Kalyan Chaubey is a joint secretary of this organisation and Ajay Patel its senior vice president, the president is ... (1,1,4)

19 The Golden Glove award, which was introduced in 1994, was initially named after this legendary Soviet keeper. (3,6)

DOWN

1 Iranian kabaddi player ... Atrachali. (5)

2 ... Busquets, Spanish midfielder who represents Barcelona. (6)

3 Manuel ..., India's first IM. (5)

4 The O in TOPS, the Sports Ministry programme, stands for this. (7)

6 The team from Sydney that was bowled out for just 15 in a recent BBL match. (7)

8 Walid Regragui is this national team's head coach. (7)

9 Who comes next: Havelange, Blatter, Hayatou, ... (9)

10 Fernando Santos managed this team at the Qatar World Cup. (8)

12 Thai golfer who is No. 1 in LPGA currently, Atthaya ... (8)

13 Team name is Alfa Romeo Racing but is operated by ... Motorsport. (6)

14 Cricketer Riyan Parag represents this State. (5)

16 The ... Olympics, in which village teams from Kenya compete in events such as rungu and javelin throwing, high jump, and 200m, 800m, and 5,000m races. (6)

RAMJI
SRINIVASAN

The demand and expectation on S&C coaches can be a bit unnerving, leading at times to burnout. It is important to be aware of it and to understand what triggers this feeling, for a myopic vision can make the situation worse.

Burnout signs for Strength & Conditioning coaches

We all start our careers with passion and enthusiasm but go through periods of self-doubt and insecurity at some point in our professional journey. The demand and expectation on Strength and Conditioning (S&C) coaches can be a bit unnerving, leading at times to burnout. It is important to be aware of it and to understand what triggers this feeling, for a myopic vision can make the situation worse.

Here are some warning signs S&C coaches would do well to take note of.

Professional work is no more exciting: Not enjoying going to the gym or the sporting field could be the first sign of burnout. Forcing oneself to work can be stressful. There may be behavioural changes signalling burnout: we may start cancelling appointments, not be interested in driving to the centre, not be interested in adding to our knowledge, neglecting personal training, delaying determining workout schedules, or becoming unpunctual. In other words, we may not be interested in negotiating the day ahead of us.

Physical and mental exhaustion: Tiredness affects us all, and stretching oneself when tired can by dicey. Irregular sleep and food patterns can add to the trauma, and conversely, mental and physical exhaustion can affect sleep and daily routine.

Factors affecting mental health can be many. Mental health professionals would be able to decipher the exact problem and prescribe solutions for it.

Frustration: S&C coaches are generally patient and tolerant to criticism. Their minds are programmed to absorb knowledge. They are known for developing good relationships with the players or clients, and for their PR skills. However, when burnt out, they may be uncharacteristically irritated and frustrated on even trivial matters.

Neglecting oneself: S&C coaches have always led by example by being mentally and physically fit. Appearance makes an impression on people. But when coaches are walking on thin ice and on the edge, they may not invest in themselves. They may tend to take shortcuts or just go through the motions.

Isolation: Isolation is the most dangerous symptom of burnout. We may start isolating ourselves from the ecosystem where we thrived. Many times, we may not have a confidant to lean on, and it adds to the stress. In a professional working environment, we may start avoiding fellow coaches, other members of the support staff, the management, the clients, or even players as we are mentally zoned out.

The inability to concentrate on a given task can be counterproductive. There is more to it than meets the eye. The best way to deal with it is to recognise it and not push it under the carpet till it becomes a serious problem. Taking help from other professionals and analysing the suffering objectively would be of great value.

We all experience the above-mentioned conditions from time to time, but one has to be mindful of them so as not to impede one's progress to achieve career goals.

Everyone reacts differently to similar stimuli, but it helps to unwind and be objective about the issue rather than to find temporary solutions. Talking to a professional or to people one can trust can help those suffering from burnout come out of this career-threatening malady.

Slippery slope: S&C coaches are generally patient and tolerant to criticism. They are known for developing good relationships with the players or clients, and for their PR skills. However, when burnt out, they may be uncharacteristically irritated and frustrated on even trivial matters.
GETTY IMAGES

Terrible times

A burglary at Raheem Sterling's house in Surrey forced the England star to rush back from the World Cup to be with his family. Long ago, a similar incident happened to the great Dutch star Johan Cruyff that forced him to withdraw from the 1978 World Cup.

SURESH MENON

It will be a long time before we know the full story of the burglary at Raheem Sterling's house in Surrey which forced the England star to rush back from the World Cup to be with his family. Police are usually reluctant to publicise details of such incidents for fear of copycat crimes that might put other families in danger.

This was what the great Dutch star Johan Cruyff was told following an incident that forced him to withdraw from the 1978 World Cup. "You might put ideas into the heads of other lunatics," Cruyff was told.

For long no one knew the real story as Cruyff kept quiet for nearly 30 years, breaking his silence only once all his children had left home and settled.

What had happened was this: Cruyff was in his Barcelona apartment watching a basketball match on television when someone rang the bell. When he opened the door, the caller put a gun to his head and ordered him and his wife to lie on the floor.

Cruyff was tied up and roped to a piece of furniture. As the intruder had put his gun down to do that, Cruyff's wife ran out and alerted the building. She took a frightening chance, but it foiled the attempt.

A van with a mattress had been parked outside, and everything pointed to a kidnapping bid. The couple's children were in the house too, in their room. Kidnapping for ransom was not uncommon in the Spain of the 1970s.

Not in the right state of mind: Johan Cruyff (left) of the Netherlands in action during the World Cup in 1974. A possible kidnapping bid at gun point forced him to withdraw from the 1978 World Cup. "In a situation like that you don't travel to the other side of the world and leave your family on their own for eight weeks. If you are playing in a World Cup you have to be fully focussed," Cruyff wrote in his book *My Turn*. THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

Cruyff, his wife and children were thereafter given police guards — policemen even slept in their living room. It was a terrible time. "In a situation like that you don't travel to the other side of the world and leave your family on their own for eight weeks," Cryuff wrote in his book *My Turn*. "If you are playing in a World Cup you have to be fully focussed."

Cruyff couldn't explain to anybody why he wasn't making the trip. Not even Holland's coach was told, Cryuff merely explaining that he was not in the right state of mind. Soon there was a 'Pull Cryuff Across the Line' campaign, with fans sending him messages by the bagful pleading with him to go.

Would Holland have won the World Cup had Cryuff played? "I think, quite honestly, that we might have done," said Cryuff. They faced Argentina in the final, and lost 3-1 in extra time.

Marteen Wijffels, a Dutch football writer, said: "If Cryuff had played we could have won the World Cup. He would have made us stronger. I think people were very disappointed at the time he did not go."

Cruyff, one of the greatest footballers ever, is identified with the concept of the free-flowing 'Total Football' which the Dutch played, with players inter-changing positions and often confusing their opponents.

It is one of the major tactical changes in the game, yet the Dutch have never won the World Cup despite being in three finals, most recently in 2010.

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